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A CRITICAL AND EXEGETICAL
COMMENTARY

ON

ECCLESIASTES

BY

STUART WEEKS

Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew, Durham University

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME 1

Introduction and Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6

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INTRODUCTION

A very great deal has been written about Ecclesiastes over the last two millennia.¹ The inclination of earlier generations was to read it, and to qualify its claims, in the light of other biblical literature, with the result that it has not always had the reputation for subversiveness that it has tended to enjoy in modern scholarship. Its provocative tone, however, and its concern with the human condition have always attracted interest.² It is also a very difficult

¹ For commentaries from the third to sixteenth centuries, see Starowieyski, 'Le Livre de l'Ecclésiaste dans l'antiquité chrétienne', 424–40; for commentaries and other studies 1523–1875, Weeks, *The Making of Many Books*; for 1875–1988, Reinhard Lehmann's bibliography in Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 291–322; for 1988–1998, Béatrice Perrigaux Allison's bibliography in Rose, *Rien de nouveau*, 557–629. I am aware of more than 800 studies that have appeared since then. About a hundred of those published between 2000 and 2013 are surveyed in Lavoie, 'Les Études'; cf. also Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 'Neues unter der Sonne', for 1987–1997, and 'Neuere Veröffentlichungen', for 1998–2003.

² If Ecclesiastes was ever at risk of being excluded from the biblical canon, it is not clear that its more difficult assertions were the reason. The Talmud includes a lengthy discussion of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs (see *b. Šabbat* 30b), in the course of which it is suggested that earlier sages had wished to suppress both books because they were self-contradictory (Dell, 'Ecclesiastes as Wisdom', 313–17, helpfully presents translations of this and other relevant passages). The Mishnah (*Yadayim* 3.5) also seems to suggest that the status of Ecclesiastes was disputed by the early rabbis, although it gives no explicit reason, and the book is linked here instead with Song of Songs (cf. *b. Megillah* 7a, which also talks about Esther). There is a reference in this discussion to a declaration in favour of both books, and Graetz, in an appendix to his commentary (147–73) hypothesized that there had been a 'Council of Jamnia' (or 'Yavneh') at which the contents of the Jewish canon had been finalized, and the canonical status of Ecclesiastes established. Aune, 'Origins', suggests that Graetz was influenced by a similar suggestion in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (which can be found at the end of ch. 10). That view is no longer generally held (cf. Dempster, 'Canon', 391–92): it is unlikely that any formal decision about the book's status was ever made within Judaism, and the nature of any controversy surrounding it is unclear. The mishnaic discussion speaks mysteriously in terms of books that are accepted to be sacred 'defiling the hands', and some apparently supposed that Ecclesiastes did not do so—but this very concept may have been poorly understood by the rabbis themselves, and it is interpreted in various ways by modern scholars; see, e.g., Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 108–21; Broyde, 'Defilement'; Goodman, 'Sacred Scripture'; Lim, 'Defilement'; Beckwith, *Canon*, 278–81. Strikingly,

book, not only in the sense that its claims have so often seemed to need such qualification, but also in the more basic sense that it is hard to read: generations of commentators have struggled to understand what the text actually says or means at many points. Luther was probably right to suspect that some engage with it principally for the pleasure of wrestling with its puzzles,³ but this has also, of course, been the source of much confusion and frustration, and it has compounded the broader problems of interpretation. Although a great deal has been written, therefore, it would be hard to claim that a great deal has been agreed amongst scholars, or that any consensus is ever likely to emerge around some issues.

In his important recent commentary, and in a series of other works spanning several decades, Anton Schoors has put every subsequent commentator in his debt by gathering many of the different opinions on particular points, and at that level it does remain possible to discuss and adjudicate between them—as I have tried to do in my own commentary, below.⁴ It is a lot more difficult, however, to

when R. Simeon claims in the Tosefta (*Yadayim* 2.14) that Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, it is simply because he believes it to have been written by Solomon himself, rather than through divine inspiration. We do, to be sure, find early Jewish suspicions about the book's ideas described in Jerome's commentary to 12.13–14 and in Leviticus Rabbah (28.1): Halperin, 'Book of Remedies', explores the various stories and traditions that arose around the 'Solomonic' books more generally. However, although rabbis and interpreters of various generations seem to have understood the book to have been the subject of controversy at some point in the past, they do not seem to have shared any single or consistent view of the reasons for that controversy, and they certainly did not avoid using Ecclesiastes themselves: Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 153, claims that, 'Of its 222 verses, 122 are quoted in rabbinic sources'.

³ In the preface of his commentary; the 1573 English translation speaks of 'eche man labouryng to frame diverse of the sayinges therein to his owne profession, or rather opinion whether for that their curiositie was delighted in strange, obscure and unwonted matters: or else for that in such obscure and darke writyngs, it is easie for a man to fayne what hee phansieth and supposeth'. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 146–47, compares the book to a Rubik's Cube, presenting stimulating problems that are 'there to be solved by engaging the reader's mind' (146). Given the notorious problems presented by its language alone, I am not sure on what basis Davis (166) claims that 'Koheleth's language is invariably simple'.

⁴ There is a significant overlap, of course, between Schoors' 2013 commentary and his earlier works—in particular *The Preacher* I and II. The commentary became available only after I had finished a significant proportion of my own work, and I have retained existing references to these other studies, but noted places where the views expressed in his commentary differ.

give any similar overview of ideas about the book's themes and message, or about aspects of its structure and presentation. In part, this is simply because there are so many: even in 1861, Christian Ginsburg's 'Historical Sketch of the Exegesis of the Book' ran from page 27 to page 243 of his commentary while barely scratching the surface of many issues, and much has been written since then. The greater problem, though, is that scholars find many different sorts of interconnection, so that it is not simply a matter of some scholars believing the book to say one thing while another group believes it to say something different. Writing of scholarship on Ecclesiastes in the late sixteenth century, which was a lot less diverse in its views than is current scholarship, Ginsburg remarked that 'Every fresh commentator either actually or virtually regards all his predecessors as having misunderstood Coheleth' (73)—and Eric Christianson, in *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, sets that alongside many similar observations by others, among the *testimonia* that preface his own excellent history of the book's reception.

Rather than try to aggregate all these views, I have opted in the introduction to set out my own, and to use these, so far as practical, as a framework for the discussion of other opinions in key areas. It may be taken as a given that, since scholars disagree with each other on so many points, little that I say would win the assent of every other commentator, although I have tried to indicate where my opinions represent the view of a minority, or are cries in the wilderness. I should stress also, however, that even where there is some consensus with respect to the interpretation of specific passages, the fact of consensus does not always put that interpretation beyond question: some understandings survive, I think, more through their appeal to past authority than through any inherent credibility (4.5 offers a parade example). Certain of the broader claims often made about the book seem similarly rooted in habit or inertia, and I have attempted to question these thoroughly, even where I agree with them myself.

After some experimentation, it has proved easiest to deal with the important issues in two main discussions, respectively covering the internal matters of presentation and content, and the external matters of date and context—although there is necessarily some overlap between them. The third main part of the introduction is quite different in character, and addresses the textual history of the book. I have prefaced it with an overview for those readers who

would prefer not to grapple with the drier technical issues, but I have also gone considerably further than other commentators in setting out the background to the key versions of Ecclesiastes. There are several reasons for this, the most important being that our understanding of certain issues has been transformed in the last few decades. The character and context of the Septuagint translation of the book, in particular, is much better understood, and this has consequences for the weight that we should give to its testimony. Although, furthermore, it is now more than a quarter of a century since the initial publication of the fragments from Ecclesiastes found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, these have been undeservedly neglected by most recent commentators. At a more fundamental level, though, disagreements continue to simmer in text-critical circles around important aspects of the Hebrew text, such as the real antiquity of the vocalization applied to it in medieval times, the date at which, and extent to which the consonantal text became fixed, and the proper approach to variants recorded only in late manuscripts. In most respects, I think, my opinions here are not out of step with the majority of other scholars who have worked with the texts and versions, but they may well be unfamiliar to those who do not work in this area, and it seems important, in any case, to state them: there are several places in the commentary where I have adopted readings that have been ignored or rejected by previous commentators, and this section of the introduction offers a background, a context, and, I hope, part of the justification for those decisions.

A. The Presentation and Content of the Book

It is as difficult to pull apart the various elements of the discourse in Ecclesiastes as it is to separate the significance of its words from the way they are presented. Rather than try to do either, I have opted, therefore, to present here a single brief account of the book, covering both aspects together—although we shall have to return to some questions again later, when we look at the style and affinities. As I have suggested already, a proper discussion of the many and varied past interpretations would fill several volumes in itself, so this account is necessarily of my own views, though I have tried to indicate the main areas of disagreement between scholars.

Since a detailed study of all the key passages will be offered in the commentary, furthermore, I have not attempted to offer at this point similarly detailed arguments in support of particular interpretations.

1. *Attribution and Authorship*

The bulk of the material that makes up Ecclesiastes is introduced to us as ‘the words of Qohelet’ in 1.1: ‘Qohelet’ is a mysterious epithet, not clearly either a name or a title, and its meaning is uncertain.⁵ That verse also informs us, however, that Qohelet was ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem’, and 1.12 then goes on to say that he was ‘king over Israel in Jerusalem’. Since there were, strictly speaking, no other descendants of David who ruled ‘Israel’ (as opposed to Judah) from Jerusalem, readers have long taken this to mean that Qohelet must have been King Solomon. That, of course, suits well the association of Solomon with the collection or composition of aphorisms attested in 1 Kgs 4.32 and in the titles of the book of Proverbs, but if we are supposed to be hearing the voice of Solomon, then it is not clear why we are being told about ‘the words of Qohelet’. If Solomon or Qohelet is also the author of the book, furthermore, then whose is the voice that talks about them in 1.1 and the epilogue of 12.9–14?

We shall look at the attributions to Solomon and Qohelet in more detail later, but the assumption I shall make in this commentary, mostly in line with other recent commentators, is that the book is a ‘work of imagination’ (Segal, 1), and that the identity of its actual author is unknown to us. This author, however, was responsible for creating both the speech that is attributed to Qohelet—a fictional or fictionalized character—and an epilogue which comments on that speech.⁶ Modern scholars have tended to regard the link with

⁵ Because the book itself is named after this protagonist, there is some scope for confusion. Throughout the commentary, I have followed the convention of referring to the book as ‘Ecclesiastes’ and the character as ‘Qohelet’. The latter, incidentally, reflects the usual Jewish pronunciation: ‘Qoheleth’—with an aspirated ‘t’—is, in principle, a more accurate transliteration of the word from biblical Hebrew, and is used by many other writers. On the meaning of ‘Qohelet’, see the notes on 1.1, below.

⁶ See especially Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative’. I have discussed the issue at much greater length in Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 13–19.

Solomon as a facet of this presentation: the character Qohelet is portrayed as taking on, at least for a short part of the book, the identity of Solomon. I doubt myself that that is the case, for reasons which will become clear, but suspect instead that, if the information in 1.1 and 1.12 is not just a curiously half-hearted, secondary attempt to identify Qohelet as Solomon, then it is intended to place the words of Qohelet on a par with the ‘Solomonic’ sayings in Proverbs.

Of course, many scholars until quite recently have worked on the rather different assumptions either that some historical ‘Qohelet’ himself wrote the book,⁷ and that the superscription and epilogue are simply additions to his original words,⁸ or that an editor has

⁷ This permitted much speculation about his background, based either on assumptions about the social context of such authors or on the details offered by Qohelet within the book. Among the latter, Plumptre’s essay ‘The Author of Ecclesiastes’ (cf. pp. 36–55 of his commentary) is particularly memorable, tracing as it does at length Qohelet’s childhood and youth, his period of reckless sensuality, his friendship with a fellow Jew, and his passion for a woman who turned out to be false, before he was able to settle down with a family and confront old age. A number of recent studies have reacted strongly (and quite rightly, I think) against such readings, sometimes drawing out more general problems that surround the whole notion of autobiography or the literary first person. See, e.g., Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*; Mills, *Reading Ecclesiastes*; more briefly, Koosed, *(Per)mutations*, 27–33.

⁸ A minority position, most famously voiced by Graetz (47–49) but expounded more recently (and a little differently) by Wilson, ‘Words of the Wise’, holds that the epilogue was not just added to an original version of Ecclesiastes, but to the emergent canon of the Writings, or some part of it (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in Wilson’s view). De Pury, ‘Qohéleth’, 191–95, takes it, indeed, to identify Qohelet as the editor responsible for that collection. As noted by Graetz, the earliest exponent of this theory appears to have been Krochmal, in the eleventh chapter of his *Guide* (see especially p. 119, misprinted as ‘191’ in the first edition). Cheyne, in *Job and Solomon*, 232–34, gives a useful account of its nineteenth-century reception (although he misunderstands Graetz’s reference, and cites Krochmal’s book as a journal), but goes on to show just how speculative it is. Sun, ‘Ecclesiastes’, treats the question in a different context, suggesting that the theme of death in the book as a whole has led to its inclusion among the Megilloth, more particularly, as a counterweight to themes in the other books, ‘but the epilogist may disagree with some of Qoheleth’s views and side with the rest of the Megilloth’ (190). I doubt myself that such deliberations were involved in the creation of that corpus, and although the specific claim about the epilogue may have weight in a final-form reading of the books together, it hardly speaks to the original intention behind its composition.

presented to us in this book words that were originally spoken by that historical Qohelet, and memorized or recorded in another form previously. It is difficult to disprove such assumptions, but they should not be our default position. Before Roman times, authorial attribution in the modern sense was not a general feature of ancient Near Eastern literature: most texts are anonymous, and those that give names at all (which tend to be confined to particular genres) do so not through a desire to identify the author, so much as to provide a ‘voice’, context or authority for their content. The simplest way to put it is that they bear the name of their principal character (who might or might not actually have existed as a person), and not that of their author—rather as Daniel Defoe originally presented *Robinson Crusoe* as a memoir by Crusoe himself.⁹

Many texts, Jewish and otherwise, certainly adopt this convention, and in those where it is possible that the named individuals may actually have been involved in the composition, that is probably not the reason why they have been named. None of this, it should be emphasized, is because the real authors were attempting to mislead their readers. Ancient attitudes to ‘pseudonymity’ are complicated, and the term itself is somewhat misleading, but although the boundaries between author and character were sometimes blurred,¹⁰

⁹ Provan puts a common assumption into words by insisting (29–30) that ‘There is no good reason to doubt that [Qohelet] existed and worked just as the author who quotes his words asserts to us (12:9–10); it would be curious to receive the speaker’s words from this author and yet reject his rather clear testimony about their originator’. Such third-person presentations of fictional or fictionalized protagonists are not themselves uncommon in ancient literature, however, with *Ahiqar* (see below) offering a lengthy example, and one might as well say that the long third-person subtitle of Defoe’s novel, which summarizes the story, is itself evidence for the historicity of Crusoe. When such views are expressed by explicitly religious commentators, it is tempting to suggest that they arise from a certain discomfort with the idea that a text could be both fictional and canonical. It would be fair to note also, however, that scholars have often been slow to recognize fiction elsewhere among ancient texts: the basic historicity of *Ahiqar* as a person has often been defended, for instance, however historically improbable the portrayals of his life might seem, and the fictional Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe* (which we shall also encounter later) was commonly read as a true story by earlier commentators. It might be better to say that orientalizing scholarship has tended to struggle with the idea that such relatively sophisticated, ‘realistic’ fiction, arguably pioneered in the modern West by Defoe, was pre-empted by other cultures.

¹⁰ See Weeks, ‘Predictive and Prophetic’, 35. The terminology itself creates problems. Baldwin, ‘Is There Pseudonymity?’, 8, denies its applicability here,

it is likely that ancient audiences were in general as aware of the conventions that governed attribution as modern readers are of those that govern, say, a first-person novel, with its own adoption of another voice by the author—and they are unlikely to have shared Koosed’s reaction, in her *(Per)mutations*, that ‘Qohelet, whoever he is, is lying to me’ (24). In the case of Ecclesiastes, matters are further complicated, however, because the attribution to ‘Qohelet’ is not straightforwardly an attribution to a named individual, and Koosed rightly goes on to say that ‘the author is using a persona who is writing under a pseudonym whose meaning we do not understand’, which ‘obfuscates rather than illuminates identity’. That obfuscation may have been present from the outset, but if the author was playing with the conventions in some way that his audience *did* understand, it may no longer be possible for us to share that understanding.

Michael Fox, who has done more than anyone else to shift perceptions away from a simple identification of Qohelet as the author, speaks also of the material not attributed to Qohelet in the book (principally the epilogue) as a ‘frame’ for the speech, and correspondingly of a ‘frame narrator’, who is in some sense no less a ‘character’ than is Qohelet.¹¹ What we hear in the book, therefore, is

saying that ‘Qoheleth is no more pretending to be Solomon than Shakespeare is pretending to be Hamlet, but he is inviting his readers to see life through the eyes of that superbly endowed king’—which I would take to be the very essence of pseudonymity in ancient literature. Given the scope for confusion, however, it is perhaps best avoided, and Meek, ‘I was King’, 75–77, points out that we are not, of course, actually offered the name Solomon, strictly making the term inaccurate as well (except, perhaps, when applied to ‘Qohelet’).

¹¹ Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative’, 91–92. So dominant in the twentieth century was the assumption that the epilogue is secondary, that it is easy to forget that by taking it as integral, Fox is reinstating a view that had been maintained previously by commentators as notable as Herzfeld, Hitzig (who speaks of the real author talking about his fictitious creation in 12.9–11) and Delitzsch (who is scathing about those scholars who confuse the book’s protagonist with its author). Where Fox is more innovative, is in his insistence that not even the epilogue simply presents the voice of the author. In general, his view is supported by a certain consistency between monologue and epilogue. Fox does not argue the point himself, and it is difficult to make strong claims on the basis of just a few verses, but the language of the monologue is distinctive and probably idiomatic (as we shall see later), and there is no reason to suppose that the epilogue is different in this respect—note, for instance, the use of *š-* in 12.9 (see Delitzsch, 215, who examines the matter in

never strictly the voice of the author, as such, but separate voices or identities adopted by the author. This is important for understanding the role and nature of the epilogue, which reacts to Qohelet and his words, but it also underscores the point that Qohelet himself need not be treated merely as a cypher for the author. In a work like Job, with multiple characters offering different opinions, it is easy to be aware that the author may share the views of no single character, but we should also be conscious that the use of Qohelet's voice permits the author of Ecclesiastes to express provocative opinions that may likewise not have been his own. Correspondingly, he might not have expected his audience to accept all of those opinions, or to acquiesce in Qohelet's idiosyncratic take on the world, while some of the ways in which his protagonist is presented may have been designed to shape perceptions of Qohelet alongside his actual words. As with much ancient literature, it can be helpful to treat what we are reading not as an essay in which an author speaks to us directly, but as something closer to a dramatic performance, in which we are supposed to react to the claims and viewpoints of a character who speaks before us.

2. The Character of the Monologue

The author probably does intend us, though, to understand the totality of Qohelet's words as a single speech: they are structured with matching declarations in 1.2 and 12.8 which seem designed to bring them back to where they started, and the constant, thematic statements about the 'vanity' of particular phenomena themselves tie the intervening materials to those declarations. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to speak of 1.2–12.8 as a 'monologue', and there are no explicit counter-indications that different parts were supposed to have been uttered at different times—although, as will

detail). This suggests, of course, that the author has made no attempt to distinguish between the two voices, at least in terms of the sort of Hebrew that they use, but it is also, of course, an argument against the epilogue as a whole being the work of some later redactor, who would have had no obvious reason to avoid using more conventional literary Hebrew. Similarly, we may note the uses of *'lhym* in 12.13–14, which accord with Qohelet's usage in the monologue; Sheppard, 'The Epilogue', 184, notes that Proverbs, in contrast, always uses the divine name when it talks about fearing God.

become clear, this monologue recounts Qohelet's observations and experience over a period of time, and might loosely be described as a sort of fictive intellectual memoir. At many points, however, the book feels much more like an anthology or collection, held together by aspects of its language and expression, but thematically and stylistically diverse.

This diversity is apparent even in the first three chapters, which are generally regarded as the most coherent, because although it is possible to see a progression of ideas through Qohelet's prologue about natural phenomena (1.4–11), his first-person account of his efforts to find something meaningful for humans in life (1.12–2.11), his reflections on those efforts (2.12–26), and his subsequent statements about God and the world (3.1–15), the way he talks about them fits no simple pattern. After that point, the work will be punctuated by other set-piece compositions—notably the further memoir in 7.23–8.1 and the description of a death in 12.3–5, which follows almost seamlessly from the commendations of living life properly in 11.7–12.2. There will also be some lengthy, if looser, discussions which draw together various materials and ideas around a theme—wealth and the enjoyment of property in 5.7–6.9, for instance, or the issues around human ignorance and misperception that dominate 8.5b through to 9.3 (or even, arguably, 9.12). Large parts of the book are filled, however, either by much shorter, even looser series of sayings and admonitions, or by the very brief, seemingly miscellaneous materials that make up much of chs. 7 and 10. There is, as we shall see, a certain rhyme and reason behind it, but this irregularity has frustrated attempts to find a 'structure' for the monologue that is anything more than a rather vague description of it,¹² and has

¹² As may be clear from my own presentation here, I think we can go no further than loosely to group consecutive passages as 'sections' when they share common themes or formal features—which is the approach of, e.g., Schoors, 'La Structure littéraire de Qohéleth' (an article that includes a helpful survey of previous attempts). Other commentators have sometimes tried to find much broader sections (there is another helpful review of some key proposals in Lohfink, 'Strukturen', 39–52, and an excellent overview of the scholarship in d'Alario, *Qohelet*, 17–58). Seow (46–47), for instance, breaks the book into two major sections, with the division after 6.9, and each of these into two further sections, with sub-divisions after 4.16 and 8.17. In doing so, he is adapting the proposals of Backhaus, *Den Zeit*, who places the first sub-division instead after 3.22. When, however, these sub-divisions bear labels like 'everything is elusive' (6.10–8.17), or the first and

fueled other attempts to revise and re-order the book, on an assumption that such apparent chaos could result only from disintegration or thoughtless redaction of the text.¹³ More generally, it has encouraged

third are supposed to be ‘reflection’ while the second and fourth are ‘ethics’, it becomes reasonable to ask whether there is any genuine relationship between the descriptions and much of the content. If, say, 7.8–10 seem neither reflective nor concerned with elusiveness, placing them in such a section seems at best misleading; at worst, it can force a reading of them that is entirely inappropriate. Equally, if the structural markers are supposed to be clear, then it is a problem that searches for the same sort of markers turn up different results: Nicacci, ‘Qohelet’, also identifies two major sections, which he sees as parallel to each other, but for him, the break is after 7.14, a long way from Seow’s 6.9, and for Castellino, ‘Qohelet’, the break falls at 4.17. Although scholars often look for them, there is no particular reason, in fact, to suppose that ancient writers (any more than modern ones) habitually built their compositions around balanced structures. The very different attempt of Wright, ‘Riddle of the Sphinx’, to identify structure through the book’s repetition of phrases and motifs may point to a way in which the writer has attempted to impose some order in the later, more miscellaneous parts of the book, although his own results are optimistic in their precision (as are those of Mulder, ‘Division’, which offers a revision of Wright’s hypothesis). That article should be distinguished, however, from his later ‘Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited’, and ‘Additional Numerical Patterns’, which offer a far less plausible account based on word and verse counts (later imitated in Stephanus, ‘Qohelet’, which consequently identifies 4.1–16 and 8.17–9.15, a little unexpectedly, as the book’s central texts). This technique—which seems to reflect what Asurmendi, *Du non-sens*, 16, calls ‘le penchant ludique de l’exégèse pour le Meccano’, loosely, the way exegetes love to play with texts as though with Meccano—is applied on a smaller scale in Wright’s ‘For Everything There Is a Season’. For a different but not wholly dissimilar attempt to demonstrate structural coherence, at least in the first two chapters, see especially Bons, ‘Zur Gliederung’.

¹³ Paul Haupt, not an admirer of the many interpolators he believed to have ruined the book, suggested that, ‘If the book in its present shape should have been written by one author, he must have been a duplex personality of the HYDE-JEKYLL type. But the book we have is not intact. It reminds me of the remains of a daring explorer who has met with some terrible accident, leaving his shattered form exposed to the encroachments of all sorts of foul vermin.’ See ‘The Book of Ecclesiastes’, 254. Bickell’s slightly earlier commentary is arranged on the premise (3–4) that, although there had been some hostile interpolation, the main problem with the order was that the original pages of Ecclesiastes had become disordered—which is improbable, since the book is unlikely to have been transmitted in a codex (with pages, as opposed to a scroll) earlier than the time at which it was translated into Greek, and the Septuagint Greek version has the same order as the standard Hebrew text. Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, 204, advances the not dissimilar idea that ‘from chap. iii onwards we have before us the imperfectly

rather atomistic readings of Ecclesiastes, as a loose assemblage of different sayings or poems (so, e.g., Galling), perhaps even (as we shall see) reflecting different viewpoints.

The dissatisfaction that many readers have found in this aspect of the book, however, may be as much as anything a product of modern tastes and assumptions—as Good (*Irony*, 171) puts it, ‘Perhaps we are too certain we know what a “book” is’.¹⁴ While it is true that Ecclesiastes closely resembles no other ancient composition in every respect, it is not difficult to find parallels to these particular characteristics—whether in the sudden shifts of style and topic that mark much of the Hebrew prophetic literature, or in the often baffling arrangement of aphorisms and admonitions in ancient instructions and sayings-collections.¹⁵ Among the latter, the famous *Sayings of Ahiqar* frames a very mixed group of sayings within a story of betrayal and high politics (presented, like Qohelet’s speech, as a first-person memoir in the oldest version that we have), and, rather differently, the Jewish book of Tobit moves disconcertingly from first-person memoir to third-person narrative,¹⁶ incorporating a number of set-piece prayers and sequences of admonitions, which to our eye appear simply intrusive. Rather than try to explain all such examples in terms of diverse sources or problems in transmission, it seems easier to accept that ancient audiences tolerated, and probably even enjoyed, such variations and shifts of tone. Without excluding the possibility that some may indeed have arisen in the course of transmission, we should certainly not assume that their

worked-up meditations of an otherwise unknown writer, found after his death in proximity to a highly finished fragment which apparently professed to be the work of king Solomon’.

¹⁴ Similarly Canaday, ‘Qoheleth’, 33, ‘In many respects the book defies the Western mind that looks for clear breaks in thought around which it may be outlined’. See also, e.g., Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 147–48.

¹⁵ Lange, ‘Pre-Maccabean Literature’, 300–4, goes so far as to suggest that the ‘seemingly random combination of different sapiential subgenres’ (303) is actually a mark of the instruction genre, to which Ecclesiastes must accordingly belong, even if it lacks other key features.

¹⁶ Events are seen wholly from Tobit’s viewpoint up to the point when he prays in ch. 3, and the narrative switches to third-person as soon as it extends its scope to events in distant Media of which he was unaware. This illustrates very well the extent to which person and perspective can be connected in ancient literature—but it is as jarring to us as the sudden break from Janet Leigh’s point of view in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, when the character she plays is killed.

presence in Ecclesiastes marks the book as composite or its text as corrupt.

Again, indeed, it may be more helpful to think of the material as dramatic or performative. Qohelet is not a comedian,¹⁷ but his monologue resembles many modern stand-up routines, moving as they do through different topics with a mixture of anecdotes, one-liners, and maybe even poems.¹⁸ This is a performance rather like those, designed so that each part of it can be relished in its own right, and is not a logical disquisition—a fact that is never clearer than at those points where, as we shall see later, economy or clarity of sense seem to have been sacrificed in favour of sound and style. As Alter (*Wisdom Books*, 342) puts it, moreover, ‘the relative looseness of form admirably suits the mobility of Qohelet’s thought’. We know very little about the way in which ancient compositions were ‘used’ by their readership, but there are grounds to suppose that many would actually have been performed before an audience (see, e.g., Miller, ‘Orality and Performance’), and it is certainly not difficult to imagine that this was the case with Ecclesiastes—Christianson (*Time to Tell*, 257) visualizes the monologue as a ‘one-man play’ (cf. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 186–87).

¹⁷ The ‘humorous’ reading of the book in Des Rochettes, ‘L’Humour noir’, consists principally of imagining different expressions on Qohelet’s face, rather than identifying places where the text actually appears to be funny, but many readers have found a certain wryness, and Fisch, ‘Qohelet’, 173, speaks of ‘the playfulness, the sense of being amused at one’s own expense that are the mark of the ironic consciousness’. Jarick, in ‘Ecclesiastes among the Comedians’, seeks more precisely to find points of contact between the book and Athenian comedy, and finds many. Whatever we make of those individually, they show, at least, that the Athenian writers were capable of presenting extremely cynical and pessimistic claims in a context where the audience was expecting to laugh, and that we cannot easily judge the tone of a piece simply by the sentiments that we find in it. I am inclined myself (like Greenstein, ‘Sages’, and Levine, ‘Qohelet’s Fool’, ‘Humor’) to think that there probably is humour in the book, and at least a humorous use at times of the grotesque and unexpected, but suspect that Qohelet’s own part is often as the straight man, who might make us laugh, but does not laugh with us.

¹⁸ Shortly after I had first written this, I received a proposal for a paper by Knut Heim (‘Hyper-Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes’), subsequently delivered at the 2018 SBL conference, in which he claims a little differently, although along the same lines, that, ‘It is as if Qoheleth speaks in the mode of modern stand-up comedians, where social critique is expressed regularly through indirection, innuendo, and humor, where the real meaning of what is being said only emerges from the speaker’s intonation (pitch, pause, speed, tone, stress, emphasis, etc.)’.

3. *Qohelet's Ideas*

It is hard simply to summarize Qohelet's ideas without doing some injustice to them: they are strongly interconnected, and the monologue develops various of them in different directions. It is best to sketch this development as a whole before trying to address some key points individually.

(a) *Outline*

Qohelet begins with a declaration of his themes: 'Vapour of vapours! ... Vapour of vapours! It is all vapour! What profit is there for a human in any of his business, at which he works beneath the sun?' (1.1–3). We shall look shortly at the meaning of *hebel*, the term that I have translated 'vapour' here: suffice it to say that the vapour which concerns him is immediately linked to human activity in these verses. Qohelet, however, pursues neither his statement nor his question straight away. Instead, he presents two very different blocks of evidence that will form the basis for his claims. The first, in 1.4–11, begins by contrasting the transience of humans with the permanence of the world, and goes on to describe a series of phenomena that each in their own way reaches a conclusion, but does so repeatedly: a sun that rises and sets, but then rises again to do the same, a wind that blows, then blows again, and rivers that run into the sea without ever filling it, so continue to run. Even human actions can be similar: I take the proper sense of 1.8 to be that we do not use words up when we speak, or fill our eyes and ears by seeing and hearing (although other commentators commonly see an exclamation of wonder here). Qohelet claims, accordingly, that all this movement and activity belie a fundamentally static situation, in which there is no change and nothing is new: anything that seems novel does so only because everything is ultimately forgotten.

In 1.12, there is a significant change of style and tone. Qohelet's second tranche of evidence will be derived from his own experience. He begins by summarizing his brief, initial enquiries into the role of humans within the world, into the nature of the wisdom that he uses to address that issue, and into pleasure. These lead him to find human achievements merely vapour, wisdom a source of pain, and pleasure pointless. In what I take to be a second phase, therefore, he sets out to undertake a much longer experiment in 2.3–10, which involves constructing a whole business and livelihood for himself,

and enables him also to enjoy a luxurious, wealthy lifestyle. When he comes to assess the results of this in 2.11, however, he finds that it too is vapour, which has failed to grant him the sort of profit that he really wants.

It is from the results of this experiment that Qohelet's insights and ideas begin to flow. In the first place, he understands that his wisdom has not really done him any good. It has made him no profit, and since he will die just like a fool, his earlier accumulation of wisdom was just another vapour: in a reference back to 1.11, he suggests that people forget about such equality at death because they forget about everything. With regard to this, it is important for us to be aware that Qohelet (like at least most of his contemporaries) has no belief in an afterlife where the dead might be rewarded or punished, or might even be fully conscious (cf. 9.10), so if there is any profit to be gained at all by humans, it must be while they are alive.

The reason why Qohelet feels that he has made no profit, despite becoming wealthy, is not stated explicitly: 2.11 says merely that when he turns to examine his achievements, he finds them to be vapour, and declares that there is 'no profit under the sun'. His understanding becomes clearer in 2.12b, however, and then in 2.18–23, when, after talking about the implications for the usefulness of wisdom, he goes on to spell out the problem that his business will outlast him and pass to somebody else (so is not really *his*). The more immediate concern that pre-occupies him in these verses, though, is that the business may pass to somebody who may have no wisdom, and who may have done nothing to earn it. Correspondingly, he comes to understand in 2.24 that the qualities and situations of individual humans are not connected directly to their own character, but are a matter of divine dispensation—and in 2.26 he probably goes on to reject the idea that they are straightforwardly a result of reward and punishment.

There is another significant change of style at the beginning of ch. 3, but the ideas here mark a continuation. The famous sequence of paired actions in 3.2–8 has attracted various interpretations. I share the view that it makes the point (drawn out in 3.10–11) that anything humans do must be good in its time, because everything that humans do is ordained by God. By implication, humans make no real decisions, and no action can be inherently bad. All that humans can do for themselves is to take pleasure and seek to do good (3.12). In 3.9–15, Qohelet again refers back to 1.4–11, but he

now links the permanence of the world and the ignorance of humans to divine action: God maintains that permanence and conceals his achievements from humans, so that he provokes their fear, and God is responsible for every genuine initiative.

By 3.15, therefore, Qohelet has established a particular understanding of human life within the world, and presented his reasons for that understanding: his investigations have led him to understand that humans misapprehend the nature of a world about which they can know little, and so believe that they can achieve more for themselves than is actually possible. Everything they do is in fact done on behalf of God, and nothing that they achieve is really achieved by or for themselves. There are some chinks left open in this. Most notably, at 2.10 Qohelet observes that he found pleasure in the creation of his business, and that this was in some sense his ‘share’—an idea that is picked up again in 3.12–13, where such pleasure is described as a gift or payment from God, and that is going to become a very prominent concern as the monologue goes on. Such pleasure is not, in Qohelet’s terms, a ‘profit’ that can balance out the expenditure of effort involved in living, but it is at least some compensation for all the work and hardship. In 3.12–13 this is also set alongside an idea of ‘doing good in one’s life’, which is not explained, but which perhaps indicates an idea that, even if humans cannot control their actions and outcomes, they have some responsibility for their motives.

After 3.15, Qohelet continues to draw further conclusions and to make new observations, but in a less clearly structured way. The first of these are very important. In 3.16–17, he affirms, despite the deterministic worldview that he has just espoused, and apparently despite the evidence of his own eyes, that God will judge humans. In the obscure 3.18–22, he also insists, probably in connection with this judgment, that humans are different from animals, even though the visible evidence makes the death, and so the nature, of both seem identical. These are significant counterweights to what he has said previously, insofar as they represent dogmatic beliefs that Qohelet holds despite the evidence, not apparent deductions from his investigations. They also, though, develop further his theme that the appearance of the world is misleading, and that what humans actually see can lead them to misunderstand their situation. In 3.22, commending pleasure in one’s achievements again, he adds the

observation, which will be repeated often, that nobody can see what will happen after them, and this is another aspect of the problem: we do not understand the world, and so our place in it, but we also have no way to adapt our behaviour to a hidden future, perhaps by trying to leave some mark behind us.

Much of what follows defies summary, and Qohelet explores a number of different areas. Sometimes he explicitly elaborates upon or qualifies the core ideas that he has set out in the first three chapters, and he retains a particular interest in the issues of what is good for humans, of wisdom, and of pleasure, which were set out programmatically in 1.12–2.2. Often, though, he merely brings his own, very distinct perspective to bear on topics that are tangential to these issues—among the declarations that follow swiftly after ch. 3, we find, for instance, the value of other people assessed by 4.9–12 purely in terms of material advantage (warmth, rather than any other reason, is notably offered as the motivation to share a bed with someone), while 4.17–5.6 depict communications with God as an avoidable risk, and sacrifice as something that only fools have to do.

Very broadly speaking, chs. 4 and 5 cover various aspects of human life—our relationships with other humans, with God, and with wealth. From 5.12, a series of examples, or parables, take up this last theme, and provide an opportunity for Qohelet to emphasize from various angles his understanding that wealth means nothing without the ability, granted by God, to take satisfaction from what one has; ch. 6 concludes with affirmations that humans have no power to challenge their situation or to understand their own lives. In the more miscellaneous 7.1–8.9, the principal theme is wisdom, which we shall look at in more detail below, and the monologue includes a further passage of memoir, but 7.13–18 do pick up earlier interests again, and include the provocative suggestion that we should not be more righteous or wise than needs be, and that it is simply fear of God that will get us through, while 8.2–5a depict the dangers of royal anger—perhaps to make a similar point about fear. The fear of God recurs again in 8.10–17, where Qohelet reiterates and builds upon his points that what we see of the world may mislead us, that there is nothing good for us except to find pleasure in what we do, and that God deliberately hides his achievements—which even the wise will be unable to discover.

The beginning of ch. 9 seems to mark a sort of break, in which Qohelet mulls over his observations in order to draw conclusions about the divine control of both righteous and wicked, and the human inability to understand God's attitude to them when everyone seems to meet the same fate—a problem that leads them to behave badly and to cling to life. In 9.7–10, this culminates in Qohelet's strongest and most famous statement of his belief that we should find pleasure in what we do, backed by a claim that our work has already been accepted by God. In 9.11 Qohelet then introduces a new idea of unpredictability, linked to his beliefs about human ignorance, but also probably drawing on the problem of undifferentiated outcomes: time and chance can affect everybody, while nobody knows when their time will come—in a chilling image, humans are like trapped birds or netted fish, awaiting the return of the hunter.

This idea may be picked up in the difficult 10.5–10, but those verses are followed by what seems to be a series of miscellaneous sayings up to the beginning of ch. 11, where Qohelet apparently warns against over-cautiousness in the face of ignorance: if we try to predict what is happening, we will never accomplish anything. From 11.7, this becomes a further commendation to enjoy life and find pleasure, motivated by an awareness of coming death, and in 12.3–5 Qohelet describes a death in a household (often interpreted as an allegory of old age). Even as the corpse goes to its grave, however, this is against the background of a fertile natural world that will go on, taking us back to 1.4, and after a short sequence of images that highlight the violence and wastefulness of death, Qohelet finally repeats his declaration that 'everything is vapour'.

It should be very apparent from all of this that we are not dealing with a carefully structured argument in the monologue, and even in the first three chapters there is sometimes more rhetoric than logic behind Qohelet's claims. It should also be evident, however, that Qohelet's ideas are cumulative: most of the assertions that he makes in later chapters depend on points that he has already made, and there is a deliberate effort early in the book to lay a groundwork, to which Qohelet himself not infrequently appeals. If we elaborate a little less than he does, the basic assumptions can be stated straightforwardly: activity within the world all contributes toward endless processes that are under the control of God, and human actions are no exception. Although they expend effort in

living, therefore, nothing that humans achieve is achieved simply for themselves. This means both that they receive no permanent, material compensation for their efforts—making it impossible to ‘profit’ from their work—and that their situation in life is a result of divine intentions rather than of their own worthiness. Humans have no insight into the larger processes within which their lives are lived, and this leads to a series of problems: they do not know what will happen or understand what is happening, which can lead them to draw false conclusions and to pursue pointless ambitions. In the face of all this, the best they can do to offset the cost of their efforts is to try to find pleasure in them, while the only way that they can deal with the uncertainties is to treat God with the respect that he wants, and in the expectation that he will ultimately act with justice.

In fact, Qohelet devotes relatively little space to his practical suggestions for coping with the situation in which humans find themselves, and much of his emphasis is instead on his own observations and, as we shall see, on the problems that surround human perception. If he actually does believe all this, however, then some of his early statements and actions seem puzzling. Why would he seek to find a good in human efforts, for example (2.3), when his understandings of the world and of profit would seem to preclude such a possibility almost by definition? And why would he have accumulated wisdom (1.16) when the unknowability of the world so limits its usefulness? Qohelet, indeed, asks himself that question in 2.15, shortly after declaring the impossibility of profit in 2.11, and it seems clear that we must reckon with a development in his ways of looking at the world. Another, more positive aspect of this is reflected in the emphasis that he comes to place on pleasure, which he had dismissed as useless in 2.1. As I have suggested above, therefore, we have to see a narrative dimension to Qohelet’s account from 1.12 onwards, and I doubt that his intellectual development is restricted to the first two chapters: a further short memoir in ch. 7 seems to suggest, as we shall see, that he has continued to move on.¹⁹ Since his account of the world in 1.4–11

¹⁹ As Mills says in *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 20, ‘Qohelet, the older sage, waits at the end of the story for his younger self to develop and achieve that breadth of experience which will produce the final moral vision of the narration’. Segal

seems to embody many of his fully fledged beliefs, however, it is also likely that we are supposed to regard those verses as a sort of prelude. To make his case, Qohelet presents a particular perspective on the world, then an account of his experiences, but for this second approach to addressing the points in 1.2–3, he steps backward to a time when he first became king, according to 1.12, and when he did not yet have that perspective, then shows us how he came to gain it.

(b) *The hebel Statements*

I have already mentioned the way that a certain unity is imposed on the monologue by, to use the traditional translation for a moment, statements about the ‘vanity’ of various phenomena, which tie into the programmatic declarations at 1.2 and 12.8, that ‘everything is vanity’. In the form ‘This (also) is vanity’, such statements occur nineteen times, in 1.14; 2.1, 11 (twice), 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4.4, 8, 16; 5.9; 6.2, 9; 7.6; 8.10, 14. Among these, 4.7–8 and 8.14 introduce a situation as ‘a vanity’, and then subsequently describe it again, using the more formulaic comment. Rarely, Qohelet also makes pronouncements using the ‘this (also) is...wording, but without using ‘vanity’ at all (cf. 1.17; 5.15). Clearly, these statements are supposed to draw out and embody some or all of Qohelet’s key ideas, and the Hebrew word *hebel*, which lies behind the traditional translation, also appears outside them. So 3.19 uses ‘for everything is *hebel*’ as support for an assertion, rather than as a description, while in 11.8 Qohelet claims that ‘everything which comes is *hebel*’, and in 11.10 calls youth *hebel*. In the difficult 5.7, the plural of this noun is used in conjunction with dreams and words, and 6.11 also identifies *hebel* as a product of speech. In 6.12, 7.15 and 9.9, we find *hebel* used attributively to characterize lives, or the days of one’s life, and in 6.4 it is associated with the circumstances into which a premature child is born. Not surprisingly, translators have struggled to find any English word that fits all of these contexts, but, more importantly, commentators have also failed to reach any consensus over the principal connotation of

devotes a whole discussion (107–12) to change within the book, observing (107) that, ‘Set against Kohelet’s observations of an un-understandable, unchangeable world is the man himself, who ever so subtly grows and develops. It is he who changes; he is not at the end of the book who he was at the beginning.’

hebel in the book (Meek, ‘Readings’, offers a helpful overview of the various opinions).

The basic sense of the word is unproblematic, and the difficulty lies in the fact that Qohelet uses it metaphorically: *hebel* is connected in some way with air, or the movement of air (which is why I translated it earlier as ‘vapour’), and this literal sense probably underpins both Isa 57.13, where wind and *hebel* will together snatch something away, and the second part of Ps 62.10 (ET 62.9), where humans are even lighter on the scales than *hebel*. It is difficult to be more precise than that, although we may reasonably presume that *hebel* must have been differentiated from simple nothingness, or from air itself (if that was a concept familiar to the original audience) by some quality of movement, temperature or effect. Post-biblical usage, in fact, does suggest that *hebel* is typically exhaled or exuded in some way: the word, or its Aramaic cognate, is used of breath, vapour, the hot air from cooking, and the lethal miasma of a pit or a marsh. The notions of hot air, breath or exhalation are not excluded by the passages from Isaiah and Psalm 62, while there may even be a play between literal and figurative meanings in Job 35.16, where it is *hebel*, ‘hot air’, that is said by Elihu to open Job’s mouth, when ‘without knowledge he multiplies words’. There is no good reason to suppose, therefore, that the underlying idea in biblical usage was very different from that in post-biblical Hebrew, and strictly speaking, then, Qohelet is declaring everything to be ‘hot air’, ‘vapour’, or something similar.

Of course, it may be as misleading to leave metaphors untranslated as to substitute an interpretation, and if there were any evidence *hebel* had acquired a fixed sense or connotation other than ‘vapour’ in biblical Hebrew, then by leaving it untranslated we would risk opening the term up to a wider range of interpretations than the author might originally have intended.²⁰ It does not seem

²⁰ Although he speaks of it as being used metaphorically, Fredericks, in *Coping*, 15, sees attempts to understand *hebel* in terms of vapour as ‘etymological’, and Good, *Irony*, 177, speaks of vapour as the ‘etymological basis’ of the noun. Such descriptions are misleading: even were we to suppose that the metaphor had come to convey a fixed sense, we would not normally understand *hebel* in that sense to be a new word, etymologically derived from *hebel* as vapour. This understanding apparently frees Good to pursue his rendering of *hebel* in terms of ‘irony’, an understanding derived entirely from contextual considerations, which Polk, ‘The

likely, however, that *hebel* ever settled down to convey any single meaning, and so, for example, Ps 144.4 is able to use *hebel* as a figure for transience and insignificance, while Isa 30.7 uses it of ‘useless’ or ‘insubstantial’ Egyptian aid, and Prov 31.30 contrasts beauty in a woman with piety, calling it *hebel* in order to evoke both insignificance and transience together. Although *hebel* may have come to have certain particular connotations or extended meanings, the biblical evidence suggests that, on the whole, it remained very much a live metaphor, through which writers could use the figure of breath or vapour to convey, separately or simultaneously, a variety of ideas.²¹

Naturally, these associations largely flow from the nature and characteristics of ‘vapour’ itself, which is ephemeral, and which can have a presence or existence while possessing no actual substance or ability to affect anything—it has been suggested that a comparable figure in English might be ‘a bubble’ (Burkitt, ‘Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?’, 28; cf. Zimmerli, *Die Weisheit*, 16). In a few places, however, the imagery seems to depend not on the nature of vapour itself, but on the nature of interactions with vapour, which can be felt but not grasped, or can be blown at people, so that it is a source of confusion or frustration (see, e.g., Ps 39.7 [ET 39.6], where the word cannot imply the same as in the preceding verse, or Job 27.12). A verb derived from the noun has corresponding implications of confusion or deception: it is used of being misguided (Ps 62.11 [ET 62.10]) or of misleading others (Jer 23.16), and the noun perhaps takes on this connotation where it is used with the verb (2 Kgs 17.15; cf. Jer 2.5; Job 27.12).

Given the wide range of possible meanings that can be attached to such a metaphor, it seems likely that the original audience would have to have been guided to Qohelet’s intended sense by their understanding of the contexts in which he uses it. An important clue is also offered, however, by the way he links *hebel* to other expressions from an early point, and most notably to the alliterative descriptions *rě‘ût rūah* and *ra‘yôn rūah*, which are found a number

Wisdom of Irony’, 8, rightly criticizes as based on an idea that ‘words are simply empty ciphers, completely dependent upon context to fill them with sense’ (although he himself sees irony as central to Qohelet’s message).

²¹ See especially Miller, ‘Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of הֶבֶל’, and his *Symbol and Rhetoric*.

of times (see 1.14; 2.11, 17, 26; 4.4, 6; 6.9; and 1.17; 4.16).²² The sense of these is not itself entirely undisputed, but the second word in each, the common term *rûah*, is itself used of breath or wind, and the link with *hebel* suggests that a similar metaphor of air is being used. Neither *rě'ût* nor *ra'yôn* appears as a Hebrew word elsewhere in biblical literature, but both do appear there as Aramaic words: *rě'ût* with reference to royal and divine wishes or decisions in Ezra (5.17; 7.18), and *ra'yôn* referring to thoughts or worries in Daniel (2.29, 30; 4.16 [ET 4.19]; 5.6, 10; 7.28). Since there are many other connections with Aramaic in Ecclesiastes, it is hard to ignore these established uses, and they point to *rě'ût rûah* meaning something like 'wishing for wind', and *ra'yôn rûah* either the same, or possibly 'worrying about wind'—although, since *rûah* can also mean 'spirit', they could alternatively connote 'wishing' and 'worrying' by one's spirit, and there may even be a play on both senses.²³

The more precise implications of these expressions may be apparent from other usage: 5.15 uses a similar figure of 'toiling for *rûah*' either to describe the zero net gain of a human at death, or with ironic reference to their (ultimately pointless) reasons for working. This understanding is compatible with the one occasion when *ra'yôn* appears in Ecclesiastes without *rûah*: in 2.22 the *ra'yôn* of a human heart is set beside physical toil, in a context which suggests that it means mental labour, ambition, or anxiety. This verse might be compared with 4.6, which does not use *rě'ût rûah* as a simple comment on a situation, in the normal way, but again links it with physical toil, counting both as less desirable than a little tranquility. Such references suggest that we are dealing with a way of talking about human motivation and pre-occupation, and both expressions apparently connote some sort of pointless anxiety,

²² It is possible that whereas the traditional Hebrew text has two expressions, the other ancient versions were based on texts which had only *rě'ût rûah*: see the note at 1.14.

²³ Hosea 12.2 uses the expression רעה רוח in parallel with רדף קדים, 'chases the East wind', and the Hebrew verb רעה there probably means 'herds, shepherds': the meaning of the imagery is not entirely clear, but it is associated with the Northern Kingdom's betrayal of God and cultivation of relationships with Assyria and Egypt, so perhaps conveys an idea of effort that will ultimately prove futile. Several of the ancient translations connect Qohelet's usage with רעה, probably because of this passage, but if they are right to do so, the sense is probably similar to that derived from the Aramaic.

desire ('wishful thinking'), or even labour. This suits the context of Qohelet's initial statements about *hebel*, which throughout 1.2–2.11 is associated with human efforts, and it seems highly likely that the use in conjunction with these other expressions would have led the audience to think of the broader *hebel* metaphor, at least initially, in terms of futility and pointless aspiration, rather than of, say, transience or any of its other established implications.

Without going through all the instances in detail here, it becomes clear as the book progresses that when Qohelet singles out particular situations as *hebel*, he is not referring to precisely the same sort of issue in every case. What the various situations do seem to have in common, however, is that they each involve a problem of human perception or expectation: an activity or a phenomenon is *hebel* when humans are driven to think or act in some way by a false or faulty apprehension of what they are doing. Typically, it is the misguided action or effort itself which attracts the description, but Qohelet also uses *hebel* to describe situations which can or do cause such misguidedness, because humans misinterpret what they see in them—the prosperity of a man who will not enjoy it, for instance (6.2), or the continuing good health of the wicked, which conceals the fact of divine judgment (8.10–14). To put that in the terms of the metaphor itself, what Qohelet sees in each case is something like an attempt to return the touch of a breath of wind on our skin, and the broader expectation of humans that they can grasp what they can sense.²⁴ When he talks in 2.15, for instance, about his own past

²⁴ It is tempting to compare a well-known Greek analogy. Monimus of Syracuse, who was active in the fourth century BCE, is reputed to have claimed that τὸ πᾶν τὰ πάντα, perhaps literally 'Everything is smoke'—a claim that is naturally reminiscent of Qohelet's belief that 'Everything is *hebel*'. Where this claim is preserved much later in Sextus Empiricus, Πρὸς λογικούς (*Against the Logicians*), it is glossed as οἷσις τῶν οὐκ ὄντων ὡς ὄντων, loosely 'trying to treat things that don't exist as though they did exist'. The term τὸ πᾶν, to be sure, may already have lost much of its metaphorical quality, if it ever possessed such: the cognate verb is used of smoking, but the noun seems to have drawn its sense of 'delusion' or 'self-satisfaction' from its use to describe fevers and delirium. I doubt, furthermore, that Monimus was directly an influence on Ecclesiastes, as is sometimes suggested (e.g. by Amir, 'Doch ein griechischer Einfluss?'), let alone that Qohelet's claims are intended specifically to echo Monimus (as Köhlmoos claims at 1.2): the Greek debate about reality and knowability is conducted at a much greater level of abstraction and generalization than is Qohelet's discourse. All the same, Monimus makes a point that is very similar to Qohelet's, about the

efforts to be wise, which are now revealed to have gained him no real advantage over the fool, the illusion lies in the false or thoughtless expectations that had motivated him, while in 5.9 it lies in the pursuit by others of a fulfilment that they will never find.

This mismatch between expectation and reality may induce a sense of frustration or futility, but *hebel* does not in itself describe that sense, and those whose motivations are *hebel* (in Qohelet's view, at least) may never realize that fact for themselves. If the elusiveness of air is a key element of the metaphor, moreover, that quality does not adequately describe Qohelet's use of it: the problems that he sees lie not simply in the qualities of *hebel*, but in the false expectations that it can engender. An appreciation of this underpins what has certainly been the most influential modern interpretation of *hebel* and Qohelet's description of situations as *hebel*, which draws on existentialist ideas of 'absurdity', and which is especially associated with the work of Michael Fox. According to this understanding:

Underlying Qohelet's *hebel*-judgments is an assumption that the system should be rational, which, for Qohelet, means that actions should invariably produce appropriate consequences. In fact, Qohelet stubbornly expects them to do so. Qohelet believes in the rule of divine justice. That is why he does not merely resign himself to the violations of equity he observes. He is shocked by them: they clash with his belief that the world must work equitably. These violations are offensive to reason. They are absurd. (Fox, 'The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet', 426)

This captures very well the mismatch between expectations and reality that seems to be embodied in Qohelet's use of *hebel* as a metaphor, but it also imports ideas that are expressed directly nowhere else in the book, and ignores some that are. As we have seen, Qohelet believes strongly in divine judgment, but also in divine control of events: when he sees circumstances that seem to stand in contradiction to the former, it drives him to emphasize the latter. Correspondingly, the problem in a passage like 8.10–14 is not that the world is irrational, but that what humans can perceive of

inability of humans to distinguish what is real, and it might not be inappropriate to suggest that, if such ideas had any more general currency when the book was written, they would have informed the audience's understanding of Qohelet's claims.

God's work does not enable them to understand it, so that their own reasoning and subsequent behaviour is based on a false perception. In, say, 5.18–6.2, on the other hand, the illusion lies in the identical appearance of those who can enjoy what they have and those who cannot. To be sure, this means that from a human perspective the world or things within it may seem bent or crooked (cf. 1.15; 7.13)—and the fact of possession without enjoyment is a hard thing for humans to put up with (cf. 6.1). The essence of Qohelet's message, however, is not that the world is working wrongly, but that humans cannot see it properly—because it is clearly no part of God's intention that they should do so. To that extent, nobody and nothing—least of all 'the system'—is irrational or at fault. The individual mismatches of expectation that Qohelet isolates are merely symptomatic of the fact that 'all is *hebel*', and that human understandings must necessarily be based on information that is limited, and potentially misleading.

There is a relationship between this and existentialist conceptions of the absurd, and it is not at all inappropriate to read Ecclesiastes in dialogue with such approaches to the problem of human existence in the world—indeed, it would not be wholly anachronistic to say that, in some important respects, Qohelet addresses key issues of existentialism in ways that would not be entirely alien to that tradition.²⁵ The translation of *hebel* as 'absurdity' helps to bring out such connections, but at the same time it potentially imputes to Qohelet, certainly in Fox's understanding, a view of the cosmos as

²⁵ The link is made explicitly in a popular article that appeared shortly before Fox's: James, 'Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists', which examines it, however, only in a very general way, and around the same time Schwartz, 'Koheleth and Camus', compared Ecclesiastes with Camus' portrayal of Sisyphus (although he noted differences between them). The issue had been in the air a long time, though: well before all these, and in 1968, the same year that Barucq pre-empted Fox by characterizing *hebel* as 'absurdité' (as Pennacchini, 'Qohelet', was later also to do in 1977), Gordis devoted a chapter of his third edition (111–121) to denying the validity of such comparisons. Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 96 n. 25, mentions some other works, and there is a useful list of studies in Gericke, 'Comprehensive Typology', 3–4, to which we might add Christianson, 'Existential Legacy', a powerful reading that looks at existential attitudes to the holocaust. Among those who oppose the comparison, Shuster, 'Being as Breath', explicitly rejects existentialism in favour of a comparison with Heidegger, and Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 168–70, declares that Qohelet is 'no modern existentialist', while Ehlich, 'Metaphern', 59–61, offers some thoughtful qualifications.

meaningless or irrational that he would only hold if he believed God himself to be irrational.²⁶ What he actually seems to believe, rather, is simply that humans try to live meaningfully in a world that is itself meaningful, but are prevented from aligning themselves properly to that world by the limits of their own perception²⁷—a belief, that, as we shall see, leads him to emphasize the limits of human wisdom.

It is difficult always to exclude other nuances in some places, and in 9.9, for instance, *hebel* surely carries some additional or even alternative implication that human life is ephemeral and transitory.²⁸ What *hebel* seems principally to represent for Qohelet, however, is bound up with this misapprehension by humans of the world, and

²⁶ On the pursuit of meaning that Fox sees as a counterpart to the declarations of absurdity, see his ‘Inner-Structure’. The same issue can be raised, I think, in respect of Rudman’s idea (in ‘The Use of הֶבֶל’) that the various implications of *hebel* are linked by the idea of chaos, and that Qoheleth ‘believed the world was under the dominion of chaos’ (141).

²⁷ Haden, ‘Qoheleth’, discusses the issues usefully in terms of ‘alienation’ and ‘epistemic distance’, making the important point also that, as Qohelet’s own declarations about God show, God in the book is not supposed to be wholly unknowable—although he then goes on to attribute to Qohelet a theology that is more conventional, I think, than the text itself suggests. It is also interesting to compare Atkinson’s summary of an emphasis found in the interpretations both of Bonaventure and of Luther: ‘the problem Solomon is confronting is not creation in itself, but the way in which humanity *sees* it and responds to it in word and deed’ (*Singing*, 191; his italics).

²⁸ Fredericks, *Coping*, sees this as the primary sense, while allowing for other nuances elsewhere. Against readings that permit various implications, Fox argues (35–6) that *hebel* cannot have different meanings in different places ‘because then the summary “All is *hebel*” would be meaningless. Indeed, it would be specious reasoning or a rhetorical device—arguing from disparate categories that share only a multivalent label.’ That is fair so long as it is not taken too far: we could equally argue that Qohelet is indeed more rhetor than logician, and that the use of a multivalent metaphor permits him to conjure a unity that would be impossible were his language more precise. Were we to insist, on the other hand, that he is genuinely trying to make an argument here, then we should also need to bear in mind that *hebel* lends itself to the sort of equivocation, intentional or otherwise, that is found repeatedly even in the works of Plato. Reviewing various translations of *hebel*, Alter, *Wisdom Books*, 340, offers the important reminder that ‘all of these English equivalents are more or less right, and abstractions being what they are, each one has the effect of excluding the others and thus limiting the scope of the Hebrew metaphor’. Alter accordingly opts to retain that metaphor in his own translation, rendering the noun as ‘mere breath’, but I am not sure that that has the same range of resonances for a modern audience that *hebel* would have had for an ancient one.

of their place within it: they invest effort for things they cannot gain, or for reasons which are false, while they fail to pursue or to accomplish the only truly beneficial option which is open to them—pleasure in their activities—either because their concerns lie elsewhere, or because they have been misled into behaviour which may shorten their lives or prevent their enjoyment. What confronts humans is *hebel* because it is misleading or illusory, but what they typically do in response to it is also *hebel* because it is misguided or deluded. Without an equivalent, established metaphor in English, it is difficult to translate *hebel* in a way that reflects all the different nuances, even if we are willing to sacrifice the continuity of Qohelet's usage by adopting different terms in different contexts. The idea of an illusion, however, and of corresponding human delusion or confusion, comes close to catching the sense of *hebel* both in Ecclesiastes and in many of the other texts where it is used, so I have generally adopted those in my translation.²⁹

Beyond the issue of meaning and translation, though, it is important also to appreciate the function of *hebel* as a unifying structural device, which holds much of the monologue together while simultaneously serving to separate particular observations and discussions from each other. It is striking, therefore, although rarely remarked upon until quite recently,³⁰ that Qohelet continues to use the word

²⁹ I would distinguish this from the interpretation in terms of epistemological scepticism which Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 40–51, adopts (on that, see Lohfink, 'הֶבֶל-Aussage') and Seow's comparable idea that Qohelet is depicting the world as impenetrable (see 'Beyond', 15–16). Fisch, 'Constructive Skepticism', understands the issue in similar terms, but prefers to think in terms of the 'tentativity' with which humans are forced to act, unable to achieve certainty in the world. He speaks of Qohelet's problem (177) as 'divining...the possibility, meaning and prospects of rational and progressive action in conditions of thorough (epistemic) uncertainty'. Qohelet's use of the term, I think, expresses not his belief that humans cannot know reality, so much as his belief that they misapprehend it, and that it lends itself to such misapprehension. A significant part of the problem is that they do not always, or even usually, recognize the limitations, and so do not act, perhaps, as tentatively as they should.

³⁰ Carrière, 'Tout est vanité', extrapolates a pattern in Qohelet's use of the word from Wright's observation (in 'The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited', 44), that the numerical value of *hebel* (5+2+30+37) is equal to the number of times it occurs in the book. His numerological suggestions are unconvincing (and we may note that Wright's original count required him to delete one use as secondary, which Carrière does not); the divisions that he imposes also seem arbitrary.

after 8.14, but stops using his ‘This (also) is *hebel*’ formula at that point, with some four chapters of the book still to go. The simplest explanation for this, of course, would be that after this point, the monologue no longer introduces new situations or phenomena that Qohelet wants to characterize this way, and it is certainly true that what immediately follows (at least up to 9.12) could be understood as a sort of summary or extrapolation. We might perhaps have expected some such statement in connection with 9.13–15, but Qohelet instead derives from that a series of sayings about wisdom, and after this, down to ch. 12, his speech consists mostly of sayings and admonitions, with only occasional observations of situations that might earlier have attracted the formula. Without putting too much weight on the absence, it might be reasonable to suggest that the cessation of this formula is a structural device in itself, as much as was its presence in the earlier chapters: towards the end of the book we move into a phase where Qohelet is no longer concerned to draw out the misperceptions that lie behind human situations and behaviour, but to draw some wider conclusions and to offer some broader, more miscellaneous advice that loosely relates to those conclusions. Segal (108) notes the disappearance of the first-person perspective toward the end of the monologue (after 9.13, the only first-person suffix is in 12.1, where it does not refer to Qohelet, and the independent pronoun last appears in 9.16; the last first-person verb is in 10.7): this perhaps also reflects the extent to which the discourse shifts away from the personal engagement and examination that turned earlier chapters more visibly into a quest.

Carrière does, however, draw attention to the shift in Qohelet’s discourse, and the more varied uses of *hebel* in the last chapters. Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 127–28, sets out in detail the uneven distribution of the term, and Segal picks this up as an instance of change within the monologue (108), going on to suggest (136–37) that there is a shift away from using it to characterize situations, and toward using it as a way to describe the fleetingness of life (cf. 6.12; 7.15; 9.9). I am myself inclined to think that this is indicative more of changes in the content than of some attempt to depict Qohelet becoming ‘less enamored of the word’ (136), although those changes may themselves, of course, be an aspect of Qohelet’s characterization. Gianto, ‘Theme of Enjoyment’, argues that the change after 8.14 marks the gradual emergence of pleasure as an alternative to the reality of *hebel*, which seems to place too much weight on that particular theme in the closing chapters, but may be closer to the mark.

(c) *Wisdom*

Word distributions and frequencies are not always a very useful way to approach a text, but given Qohelet's undoubted concern with wisdom, it is interesting to observe just where he uses terms from the relevant Hebrew root *ḤKM*. These appear no fewer than 53 times, across 44 of the book's 222 verses (although two are in the epilogue at 12.9 and 11, so are not actually uses by Qohelet himself), and this frequency is similar to that found in the book of Proverbs, which is around two-and-a-half times longer and has 104 occurrences—it is slightly higher, if anything. Of course, wisdom is not always his focus when Qohelet uses the vocabulary of wisdom, but it would be fair to say that Qohelet refers to no other of his preoccupations so often—*hebel* appears an impressive 38 times, but eight of these are in 1.2 and 12.8—and from those raw data alone, we might well conclude that Ecclesiastes is very much a book about wisdom. The terminology is distributed irregularly, however, with the relevant words falling largely in 1.13–2.26 (17 uses), 7.4–8.5 (16), and 9.10–10.12 (13). Around 90% of Qohelet's own uses, therefore, are to be found in less than 40% of the verses in the monologue, and all the way between the end of ch. 2 and the beginning of ch. 7, such vocabulary only appears twice: at 4.13, where wisdom is an attribute of the youth but not the issue at stake, and at 6.8, where Qohelet apparently reaches back to 2.13–16 in order to draw an analogy.³¹

This concentration correlates with Qohelet's concerns in the first two chapters, where wisdom is a key tool in his investigations, and then a target of his concerns in the angry reflections that follow. In ch. 7 through to the beginning of ch. 8, moreover, wisdom is itself the principal topic of Qohelet's discourse. It is difficult to generalize about the second half of ch. 9 and the first of ch. 10, but wisdom and the wise appear in lists at 9.10–11, and most of the other uses are in sayings about wisdom. We find a lot of references to wisdom, in other words, when Qohelet is talking either about the

³¹ It is harder to judge the 36 uses of the verb *yd'*, 'know', because Qohelet does not use it typically of human knowledge in some more general way, but of things that he or others know. The cognate noun *d't*, however, is commonly used in association with 'wisdom', and has a similar distribution (it appears in 1.16, 18; 2.21, 26; 7.12; 9.10; 12.9).

experiences that shaped his views or when wisdom itself is at the centre of his attention, but the concept is notably rare in the middle of the monologue, where he talks about divine action and human behaviour.

After such a virtual absence of references in chs. 3–6, the way Qohelet then deals with wisdom in ch. 7 is all the more intriguing. Much of this chapter is very difficult to interpret, for various reasons, but in 7.1–6 Qohelet presents wisdom in ways that might seem less than appealing: where the mind of fools is like a house of celebration, that of the wise is like a house of mourning, and the wise offer rebukes where fools offer songs and laughter. In 7.7, 11–12, and probably 19, the power of wisdom is heavily qualified, and, perhaps in another reference back to 2.15, 7.16 warns against being unnecessarily wise. Qohelet has included wisdom in none of his previous recommendations or admonitions, and when he does finally turn to it, his commendation is, therefore, lukewarm at best—he makes folly sound a lot more appealing. Similar qualifications are attached in chs. 9 and 10: the wise are as liable as anyone to suffer the vagaries of chance (9.11), wisdom is likely to go unheeded however useful it may be (9.13–18), and the benefits of wisdom are contingent on the profit or advantage it offers (10.10). In 10.2 and 12–13, to be sure, the wise man acts as a foil to the fool, but these are really the only points at which Qohelet adopts a conventional attitude towards wisdom.

In the course of 7.23–8.1, Qohelet undertakes a quest to find wisdom (probably, as we shall see, wisdom personified as a woman), and this episode is especially interesting because, up to this point, the Qohelet who had so magnified his own wisdom in 1.16 has made no subsequent mention of it since 2.15. When he does finally talk about that wisdom now, it is no longer in terms of how wise he has been: instead, Qohelet declares that he wants to be wise, but finds it beyond him. After recounting his failure to discover wisdom, he goes on both to speak bitterly of wisdom as a woman who traps men when God wills it, and to finish in 8.1, furthermore, with a declaration that probably pairs wisdom's capacity to enlighten with its tendency to dishearten. It is not entirely clear how we are supposed to understand all this—and the text is probably damaged at points, making the task harder. It seems unlikely, however, either that Qohelet is seeking simply to supplement his existing wisdom with some more

insightful form of wisdom, or that he has suffered an intellectual decline. When the tool with which he made his enquiries in 1.13 seems now to be utterly beyond his grasp in 7.23–24, the point seems rather to be that his reflections have changed his relationship with wisdom. We might say that his heart is no longer in it, even if he wishes otherwise, although Qohelet himself suggests that he no longer feels trapped by wisdom's own heart: his new incapacity is also a form of liberation, and when he sets out to find wisdom, it is less to embrace than to accuse her (a point that has been lost in the Hebrew text, but not in the Greek). In any case, we shall hear nothing more of Qohelet's own wisdom until the epilogue.

In its treatment both of wisdom generally and of Qohelet's wisdom in particular, the book depicts a significant shift away from Qohelet's enthusiastic embrace of it in 1.12–2.10 toward something that we might almost call a loss of faith. At the outset of his enquiries, wisdom was not just a tool (1.13; 2.3, 9), but one of the primary objects of his investigations (1.17–18; 2.12; 8.16); his confidence in wisdom, however, seems to have survived neither his immediate conclusions, nor his broader reflections on the world—which is hardly surprising once he has come to realize its limitations. From an acknowledgment as early as 1.18 that wisdom can be a source of pain, Qohelet has realized in 2.13–16 that this pain comes with no corresponding gain: wisdom merely allows him to perceive his fate more clearly, not to change it. By 8.5–9, his list of 'what the wise man knows' consists entirely of known unknowns and of situations that cannot be changed, while 8.17–9.1 stress both that the wise can know no more than anybody else about what God has done, and that the wise are as much under God's control as everybody else. Although he never condemns wisdom, therefore, and continues occasionally to contrast it favourably with folly, the view of the world that Qohelet has developed excludes the possibility that wisdom might ever achieve anything that he regards as important.³²

³² Sharp, 'Representation', 65, suggests: 'The book is working as hard as it possibly can, with rhetorical tools as sophisticated as those one might encounter in any work of literature ancient or contemporary, to make the point that "Qohelet's" reliance on wisdom alone is precisely not a viable way to live'.

(d) *The Basis of Qohelet's Ideas*

What we have seen already about the *hebel* declarations and about Qohelet's attitudes to wisdom merely emphasizes what is surely a major theme of the monologue more generally: human ignorance is determined by the nature of the world, and by the deliberate design of God, with the consequence that human perception is unreliable. We may reasonably ask, therefore, on what basis Qohelet presumes to offer us his own insights as reliable, and how he can claim to know anything about what is supposed to be unknown. Is this merely a literary device, which introduces, in effect, an omniscient narrator, or is Qohelet's knowledge plausible despite his denials of human knowledge?

The book offers no direct answer to that question, and although Qohelet himself has much to say about knowledge and ignorance, epistemology itself is nowhere addressed directly as a concern. That has not, however, prevented scholars from enquiring into Qohelet's epistemology, and there has been some very important work in this area, even if, as is so often the case when we are dealing with Ecclesiastes, no consensus has been achieved.³³ In this respect, some issues are complicated by problems surrounding the interpretation of particular passages: 7.27 has often been read, for example, in terms of inductive reasoning (quite wrongly, I think).³⁴ The principal difficulty, however, has proved to be the significance that different scholars attach to Qohelet's many statements about having 'seen' or 'observed' particular phenomena, and to his use of ideas associated with those observations. In particular, some have been drawn

³³ There is a helpful recent overview of scholarship in Gericke, 'Comprehensive Philosophical Approach', who notes the more detailed surveys in O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 138–42, and Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 35–60.

³⁴ In fact, a great deal of the discussion in this area has based itself on some of the most difficult passages in the book. For details see the commentary and notes, but, in short, I doubt that there is any 'testing' in 2.1 and 7.23, or that Qohelet's references to 'finding' ever imply anything more than 'encountering' or 'discovering' (as in 7.29): they do not embody some idea of arriving at a conclusion or understanding as the result of calculation. In 7.27, Qohelet is encountering one woman after another in the hope or expectation of thereby encountering something that he seeks, and although it has become very common to read this as 'adding one thing to another to find the sum' (as the RSV puts it), such an understanding requires us, for no good reason, to insert an extra verb, to read one preposition as though it were another, and to imbue the (admittedly difficult) final noun with a sense that it possesses clearly nowhere else.

to see in them an approach that is specifically empirical: Qohelet seems to be extrapolating conclusions directly from his experience in such cases, not importing them dogmatically or reasoning his way to them on the basis of other conclusions.³⁵

If Qohelet were indeed an empiricist at heart, then his conclusions would certainly stand in strong contrast to his methods. In most cases where he describes a situation, however, Qohelet seems concerned to illustrate his existing beliefs, rather than actually to derive any new understanding. The most important potential exceptions are in the first two chapters, where he carries out his investigations and draws conclusions from them, but these need to be read with some caution. In particular, the rejection in 2.11 of his own works, and consequently of any possible profit for humans, seems not to be derived from his actual experience of building businesses—all apparently successful ones—but from his insistence that to qualify as a ‘profit’ what one owns must be something that can only be earned, and that can never belong to anybody else subsequently.³⁶ His conclusion, in other words, is derived not from his experience, but from the application to it of a presupposition. Interestingly, what does come out of his experience, according to the previous verse, is an appreciation of pleasure, which Qohelet had earlier tested experimentally in 2.1 as well: what Qohelet gains in these chapters is not a new knowledge validated by experience, but an understanding that there can be value in the very act of experiencing something.

It is also important to be clear, whatever weight one puts on Qohelet’s claims to experience, that much of his worldview is

³⁵ See, e.g., Fox, ‘Qohelet’s Epistemology’; Piotti, ‘Osservazioni sul Metodo’; and, more strongly, Hayman, ‘Qohelet and the Book of Creation’, 98–99; Sciumbata, ‘Peculiarità e motivazioni’. Schellenberg’s study of Qohelet’s empiricism in *Erkenntnis*, 161–91, leads her to understand his appeals to individual experience in terms of his belief that human knowledge is limited to what happens within the world, where only experiential and empirical enquiries are possible (196). I am more sympathetic to the view of Johnstone, in ‘Preacher as Scientist’, 219, that Qohelet ‘sets out deliberately to observe in an empirical way... But...nothing observable is in the end valid, as giving the final truth about life, or as providing satisfaction, meaning, or profit.’

³⁶ Qohelet’s take on all human property is very like that expressed in a familiar advertising slogan: ‘You never really own a Patek Philippe, you merely look after it for the next generation’ (Leagas Delaney agency, 1976–present).

derived from dogmatic statements, which, far from being affirmed by his observations, often stand in contradiction to them (cf. Gericke, ‘Concept of Deity’, 3). Indeed, since the whole problem of perception is rooted, for him, in an understanding that the world we can see does not adequately represent the world as it really is, perception is problematized by his *belief* in a different, unobservable reality.³⁷ In Qohelet’s ‘real’ world, God differentiates and judges humans, or treats them according to their fear of him, and he arranges human lives according to his own preferences, but little or none of this is visible to humans (cf. Piotti, ‘Percezione II’). In the ‘real’ world, likewise, there is a meaning and a reason for events that seem random and unpredictable to humans with their restricted insight. To his audience, who would surely have shared his belief in the validity of these religious beliefs, Qohelet is effectively saying that, if the world as we see it seems not to reflect them, it is not because they are unreal, but because we cannot properly see the world.

This is a dogmatic, theological conservatism, but its implications are radical in other areas. Most importantly, if such realities are invisible to us, or even hidden from us, then this fact inevitably casts doubt on claims made about revelation and about the capacities of human wisdom. Qohelet has nothing to say directly about the former, although the context of his comments about dreams in 5.2 and 5.6 suggests that they may be a dismissal of individual aspirations to gain insight directly from God (see the commentary).³⁸

³⁷ O’Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 144, suggests that Qohelet ‘creates irony by juxtaposing his *a priori* worldview alongside his experiential knowledge without offering an explanation’, and later (149) that ‘It is these unexpected turns from empirical to rational/traditional judgments which force readers to question Qohelet’s epistemological foundations and his relation to his tradition’. That may be so for readers whose focus is on Qohelet himself, but where such juxtapositions are clearly deliberate, it seems more probable that they are intended to address human perceptions in general, rather than Qohelet’s in particular.

³⁸ I doubt that those comments are directed consciously at the claims of apocalyptic literature (cf. Rosso Ubigli, ‘Qohelet di fronte’, 227–28; Mazzinghi, ‘Enochism’, 161–64), not least because I understand them to be set within the context of his advice about the temple in particular. More generally, though, if Qohelet is making a deliberate reference to Deut 23.22 (ET 23.21) in 5.3—on which, see below—then he does cite the Torah, and although 4.17 seems to cast doubt on the need for anyone but fools to sacrifice, it is doubtful that we can read that as an outright rejection of legal prescriptions. Equally, the limits placed on

He has a great deal to say about wisdom, however, much of which denies its ability to rise above the mundane, and qualifies its usefulness even there. Qohelet's understanding is also radical, of course, in other respects: a dogmatic belief in divine determinism has consequences for the reality of human choice, and, as ch. 3 shows, for the whole concept of any action being inherently good or bad (an idea that will be picked up in ch. 9). On the other hand, his ideas about pleasure arise, by elimination, from the beliefs that drive Qohelet to exclude any other form of compensation. Again, though, such ideas are drawn out as the logical consequence of Qohelet's beliefs, not as the result of observation—which could not itself reveal them. We might, therefore, properly add to a description of Qohelet as dogmatist the qualification that he implicitly reasons on the basis of his dogmas—but it would be misleading to think of him as an empiricist.

Having said that his audience would most likely have shared some of Qohelet's beliefs, finally, it is important to stress that they might have had somewhat greater difficulty accepting either some of his extrapolations from those beliefs, or some of his other dogmatic ideas. Qohelet's restrictive definition of profit, most notably, is crucial in the account of his own development, but it is difficult to believe that many would have shared such a definition, or would have reacted as Qohelet does when he turns to inspect his achievements in 2.11. This is something that we shall consider shortly, when we look at the characterization of Qohelet, but more immediately it should alert us to an element of artificiality in the account of his thinking. It is interesting to examine the epistemological assumptions of the monologue, in a way that the book

human knowledge by Qohelet do not exclude the possibility of accepting prophecy or the Torah as sources of revelation, and it seems likely that Qohelet's ideas about judgment and divine control, as well as his more general reference to, e.g., righteousness, are implicitly rooted in a piety that would necessarily draw on some sort of revelation. While he shows no specific interest in the topic, therefore (as Schultz, 'Was Qohelet', 212, points out), we should probably not take his silence to suggest that the worldview attributed to Qohelet would have been understood by his audience to exclude altogether the possibility of divine communication with humans. On the other hand, Qohelet clearly does not presume the sort of links between Torah and wisdom that we find in Prov 1–9 and Ben Sira, or the corresponding portrayals of law as a source of insight into the will of God more generally.

itself does not, but there are peculiarities and idiosyncracies here that would surely have struck the original audience—perhaps more forcefully than they strike modern readers, who are accustomed to find the unfamiliar in an ancient text—and we should be wary of assuming that Qohelet is always adopting, or even attempting to model common beliefs and approaches in this area.

4. *The Epilogue and the Portrayal of Qohelet*

Qohelet presents himself to us in the monologue as a man who has devoted much of his life to answering certain questions, but who has found no adequate answers. He tells us of his own resentments, and sometimes of his incapacities, as well as of his many observations, and there is an invitation throughout for us to engage with him as a fellow human. His monologue ends, moreover, with dramatic, jarring images of death, culminating in a bleak restatement of the claim with which he began. It is more than a little disconcerting, therefore, when the last few verses of the book take pains to inform us that Qohelet was actually a writer and crafter of words, that all books like this are intended to be painful—so it's probably not a good idea to read any more—and that we should just fear God and do what he says. The problem is not simply that these statements seem out of step with all that has been said so far, but that they positively dismantle it: every effort that has been made to engage our sympathies, to provoke our laughter, anger or sadness, is revealed as deliberate manipulation by a clever writer, working in a tradition that specializes in such manipulation. With a metatheatrical flourish, this whole book, so concerned with illusion and misplaced belief, is shown to have been a sort of illusion itself, and, by implication, our suspension of disbelief as we listened to Qohelet merely another symptom of a broader problem: the imagery used is of sheep-herding, and it is we, the audience, who have been the sheep.³⁹

³⁹ So, a little differently, Koosed, *(Per)mutations*, 110: 'Qoh 12:11–12 does not fit comfortably with the book as a whole. In fact, it seems to undermine the very activity of study and book writing without which this book would never have come into existence.' She goes on to point out (111) that 'a book that begins with the emptiness of life...could not believe its own self to be full of weighty meaning'.

Going beyond this, whoever is speaking to us at the end of the book not only reminds us that it was all just a story, but then warns us against any other such painful books, and finally sends us away with some more conventional advice to be pious. For the only time in Ecclesiastes, moreover, we are addressed as ‘my child’ in 12.12, which seems to establish the speaker’s tone here as that of a concerned parent, and we hardly need the other literary resonances of that expression, so popular in Proverbs, to discern a critical comment on advice literature more generally: ‘The words of wise men are like goads, and like embedded spikes... There is much working on books without end, and much study is a wearying of the flesh’ (12.11–12). For all that the admonition here might seem to say ‘this is the only advice you should ever read’—which would be respectful, if a little odd—there is also an implication that we might have done better not even to have read this one, and that the subsequent advice to ‘Fear God and keep his commandments’ is all we really need. Despite some praise for Qohelet’s talents as a writer and a teller of truth, therefore, the epilogue—‘the first commentary on the book’, as Dell describes it (‘Ecclesiastes as Wisdom’, 309)—is hardly a ringing endorsement of his monologue, and seems more concerned that we should not worry about it too much.⁴⁰

It is hard to believe that this is just clumsiness—the result, perhaps, of some later writer who wished to praise Qohelet inadvertently undercutting what had been said: there is no obvious place in such an attempt for 12.11–12 (which is why, perhaps, scholars who take such an approach to the problem usually end up finding multiple later editors—Koenen, ‘Zu den Epilogen’, is a notable exception). While it is commonly suggested, moreover, that the last two verses, 12.13–14, were added to make the book more palatable to orthodox readers (whatever that might have meant at the time), it is likewise difficult to imagine who might have felt this way about the book but nevertheless wanted to commend it—or who might have thought, for that matter, that two such conventional verses would actually make up for the more than two hundred verses that had gone before. It is altogether simpler to suppose that the author of the monologue has merely adopted another voice here, to say something about that

⁴⁰ Scholars have paid curiously little attention to the tensions between the monologue and the epilogue, but see the thoughtful remarks in Laurent, ‘Le Livre’, 8–14.

monologue, even if it seems to follow that, in some sense, he must wish to distance the book as a whole from the words of its key protagonist (see my ‘Fear God’).

In his new persona as epilogist, the author now takes the stage that Qohelet has vacated, and turns his views back on him.⁴¹ Qohelet was indeed wise, while his teaching and his carefully crafted words have persisted beyond him and continue to convey a knowledge of the truth—but that is something about which we should be concerned. Such truth is painful, and to hear the words of Qohelet or of other wise men is potentially to experience all the downsides of wisdom that Qohelet has been so concerned to emphasize. The epilogue draws out, then, the irony that is inherent in a book of ‘wisdom’ that regards wisdom without enthusiasm, and disengages us from the rhetoric that might sweep us up into sharing Qohelet’s bleak outlook. Insofar as we can judge the tone of such things, I think that it does so rather playfully: the imagery of spikes and goads is a bit too vivid, perhaps, and the dismissal of endless books a bit too world-weary for us to take the statements as entirely earnest. Besides, if the author was really so concerned about the effects, he could simply not have written the book in the first place (and if these are not words from the author, we could say much the same of any later editor who wrote them, presumably under no compulsion to transmit the book). If this strange epilogue is indeed a little tongue-in-cheek, however, it makes some important points, both about the character of what has preceded, and about the ways in which we should react to it. If the author does distance himself from Qohelet at this crucial point, furthermore, then it raises legitimate questions about how we are supposed to view that character elsewhere in the book.

Those questions are difficult to answer in full. In matters like the idiosyncrasy of Qohelet’s language (which we shall look at later), his curious name, and his apparent fondness for commercial terminology like ‘profit’ and ‘loss’ (cf. 1.15),⁴² we can see that there was

⁴¹ Willmes, *Menschliches Schicksal*, 240, speaks aptly of the epilogue presenting ‘eine ironische Parabasis’: in early Greek comedy, the parabasis is a sort of intermission, during which, with the actors absent, the chorus sets aside its role within the play to step forward and address the audience directly on some topic, often to do with the play or the playwright.

⁴² See Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34–36, and the works cited there in n. 50.

probably scope for the author to have shaped perceptions of his character by the audience. We ourselves lack sufficient knowledge of the context to be sure just how they would have reacted—although it is probably possible to say that there is little in any of these to suggest that he was being portrayed as either the regal or the scholarly figure that many commentators have wanted to find (or, for that matter, as the dandy that Morse memorably constructs in his two-part ‘Introduction’). What does come across more clearly is Qohelet’s extraordinary materialism. The monologue begins with the question that will dominate his concerns—‘What profit is there for a human in any of his business, at which he works beneath the sun?’—and if we construe that merely as a question about the meaning or purpose of human life, then it seems unexceptionable. As Qohelet goes on, however, it becomes clear that he really does mean, very literally, a ‘profit’: he wants to know what a human can achieve so that in death they have more than they had at birth, and accordingly have something concrete to show for all the hard work of living.

That is something, perhaps, about which fewer people would be concerned, and even if the original audience might have shared his disbelief in any meaningful afterlife, it seems difficult to accept that they would, as readily as Qohelet, have rejected the significance of any mark that they might leave on posterity. Not many other people, I suspect, would ever likewise have rejected all they had made for themselves simply because they would no longer be the owner when they died (2.18–19), and although many have doubtless sympathized with the calls to enjoyment of life for which Qohelet is famous, such enjoyment remains second-best for Qohelet himself: it is what we all have to settle for, not what he really wants. Qohelet understands the world in a way that makes the profit he desires inherently unobtainable, and it is doubtful that his audience would fully have shared either his understanding of the world or his desire for such a particular sort of profit.

If we think also of his initial inability to see the purpose of pleasure (2.2) or recall, say, his deadpan delivery of the sayings in 7.1–6, which commend melancholy and the rebukes of the wise above the celebration and laughter of the foolish, then we might also suspect that Qohelet is being portrayed as somewhat less than fun-loving, for all his calls to enjoy life. Although there is doubtless some movement in his ideas about such matters, as I have noted

above, the only point at which he actually depicts *himself* as finding pleasure is in 2.10, where he declares that he enjoyed the creation and running of his business, while 2.1 probably depicts pleasure as something that he could only experience by force-feeding it to himself. We could easily go into some other curious aspects of the monologue, and most especially 4.9–12, where Qohelet commends company with no apparent concept of companionship,⁴³ but it should be clear already that Qohelet does not naturally place value in things which represent neither a material gain nor a definable benefit—even pleasure only has meaning to him when he becomes able to accept it as such.

The fact that this strange and disconsolate figure calls on us to find pleasure in what we do has provoked a certain amount of debate about whether his message is ultimately optimistic or pessimistic. Of course, if we are supposed to share Qohelet's values, then we are presumably supposed also to share his sense that the joy to be found in work is a poor substitute for the profit that he actually seeks, even if he is keen to promote it as better than nothing. If it is reasonable to suggest as I have, though, that his views about profit were unlikely to have been commonplace, then it is doubtful that we are supposed to share his disappointment in finding no such profit. Qohelet has lost a shilling and found sixpence, but what he commends is likely to be seen as a pure gain by anyone else. To that extent, at least, the book perhaps invites us to see Qohelet as Whybray does in 'Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy', even though this far from joyous preacher clearly does not view his own words in that way. If it is also reasonable to suggest from the perspective of any normal audience, ancient or modern, that Qohelet in 7.1–6 unconsciously promotes the fools, with their joy, singing and laughter, over the wise with their morbidity, vexation, melancholy and rebukes, then there is at least one other issue over which the author probably intends his readers to part company with Qohelet (at least

⁴³ Lavoie, 'Analyse de Qohélet 4,9–12', 208, observes how those verses outline the benefits of company 'de manière froide et sans émotions', 'coldly and emotionlessly'. Fontaine, never keen to find the best in Qohelet, says in 'Ecclesiastes', 154, that he 'views companionship solely from the perspective of what it can do for the ego in control', but even the more sympathetic Jasper, 'Note for our Time', 266, remarks that 'the motive of self-interest is not absent even here. It is still more a matter of what is advantageous than of what is right.'

initially), and there may be other, less obvious ones. It seems less likely that the author wishes us to embrace Qohelet's most idiosyncratic positions than that they are intended to engage our interest without compelling our agreement.

Taken with what is said in the epilogue about the words of the wise, it is tempting to see a satirical edge to all this, and Qohelet has indeed been viewed as a parody of some archetypal wise man (see especially Shields, 'Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom', and *The End of Wisdom*, which correspondingly adopt an understanding of the epilogue that makes it central to the purposes of the book).⁴⁴ The principal difficulty with that reading in particular is that we have no evidence for such an archetype ever having existed: even without getting into vexed questions about whether 'wise men' ever constituted an identifiable class, none of the many things said about them elsewhere suggests that Qohelet might be an exaggerated embodiment of some ideal. At least for the first few chapters, furthermore, he does not use the sort of admonitory or aphoristic styles associated with 'the wise' elsewhere, so if there is any sort of satire on ideas, it is not obviously matched by any consistent literary parody. If Qohelet's concerns point to him being any sort of 'type', it is more probably a businessman than a sage: it is in that sphere that we might expect such an assessment of life in terms of profit and loss, and I have some suspicion that the audience was intended to see him in such terms—but in chs. 5 and 6 he is fiercely critical himself of attitudes shaped by wealth. More generally, though, it is far from clear that we are supposed to find Qohelet actually unsympathetic as a person: even when we may not be expected to share his outlook or opinions, he has not obviously been set up for us to ridicule or reject. The condescension of the epilogue, on the other hand, and its implicit insults to our intelligence, make it hard to believe that we

⁴⁴ Longman, 38, suggests not dissimilarly that the epilogue reveals Qohelet's monologue to have been a teaching device, used by the speaker 'in order to instruct his son (12:12) concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel'. Bolin, *Ecclesiastes*, 69, sees this as 'overtly theological' and 'one-sided', allowing Longman to identify the supposedly more orthodox epilogist as 'the inspired biblical author'—although Longman himself goes no further than to suggest that this is how the book came to be included in the canon. At the very least, this sort of reading does play into the conventional dichotomy in interpretations of the book between poorly defined 'orthodox' and 'subversive' views, of which Bolin (64–67) is more generally—and rightly—critical.

are supposed to accept it uncritically as a revelation of Qohelet's inadequacies—even before we try to explain its complimentary evaluations of Qohelet himself.

Having said that the style of the book does not suggest a direct parody of existing advice literature, though, I should add that Qohelet probably does engage with such literature all the same. The key passage is the difficult 7.23–29, which we have touched on already, and in which Krüger is right, I think, to see Qohelet as talking about a personification of wisdom as a woman. More broadly, this description of 'woman Wisdom' probably forms part of an account in which Qohelet, having struggled to be wise, sets out unsuccessfully to find her. Such personifications of wisdom probably originated in the complex imagery of Proverbs 1–9, although they are found in Ben Sira and other subsequent literature (see my *Instruction and Imagery*, 158–169), so when Qohelet sets out to find a literal woman, and fails to do so despite encountering numerous people, he engages an established imagery on its own terms, probably in order to contradict the assertion of Proverbs 1–9 that wisdom is easily accessible—in that work, she stands in the street, not 'far, and deep, deep down' (7.23). This corresponds to his own more cautious attitudes toward wisdom, which we have looked at already, but it also contributes toward the picture of Qohelet that the author paints for us. As in the earlier memoir of ch. 2, Qohelet acts here, and does not just talk, but even more than in that previous account, he behaves with a sort of literal-minded naivety, treating a familiar image as though it were a reality, and conducting a painstaking enquiry for a woman who does not exist.

Of course, there is a literary conceit involved, but that naivety only adds to a sense that Qohelet behaves sometimes almost as an *idiot savant*, and that what distinguishes him from other people is not merely intelligence, but a resistance to compromise and illusion that comes close to being an incapacity. He is by no means immune to emotion, but when Qohelet looks at a world which appears not to affirm his beliefs, he does not follow others in altering those beliefs, or flinch from accepting truths that are painful to him. The author has created him not as an 'everyman', but as somebody whose unusual perspective sets him apart from most other humans in a way that those other humans might find disconcerting, and forces him to acknowledge truths that bring him no benefit or happiness. He has prepared a speech for woman Wisdom, but he engages

explicitly with other people nowhere else: the only conversations that he reports are with or in his own heart (e.g. 1.16–17; 2.1, 15; 3.17–18; 7.25), and this imagery of the self as companion is again distinctive enough to suggest that the author uses it deliberately, to portray Qohelet as unusually self-contained—if not actually lonely.⁴⁵

We are probably supposed to imagine that it is his wisdom, mentioned so early in his account as exceeding that of others, which has shaped Qohelet and his perceptions. This adds piquancy to his sense, in ch. 7, that he is no longer wise or capable of wisdom, and explains his subsequent treatment of wisdom—if 7.26 is indeed talking about personified wisdom, furthermore, then Qohelet views himself as having been caught previously in a trap (a part of which is constituted by wisdom's own 'heart'). The caution expressed in the epilogue corresponds to this portrayal: wisdom is a source of pain, not happiness, and Qohelet's whole unhappy discourse exemplifies that fact. Qohelet has been too wise (2.15), and himself commends others not to make the same mistake (7.16), so that in this respect the monologue and epilogue are actually in accord.⁴⁶ Qohelet, furthermore, does not benefit personally from revealing the true state of the world, and since the principal belief that he derives from his experience is that humans should accept and enjoy what they have, it is doubtful that he understands this truth itself to be of benefit to his audience. Although it first ensures that we

⁴⁵ Fontaine, 'Ecclesiastes', 154, reads this rather differently: 'Significantly, the author never speaks of entering a meaningful relationship and so lives in a world where he is the only true subject. Nature, women, and other social inferiors remain objects for his use, so naturally he suffers the boredom of the elite who exist in a world populated only by themselves.' With respect to the 'heart', Koosed, *(Per)mutations*, 46–47, draws attention to the fact that, despite 42 uses in the book, 'heart' has received much less attention than other supposed key terms, and goes on to suggest (51) that 'There is a split at the root of Qohelet's identity between his I and his heart'. She does not follow this up systematically, but the usage is certainly distinctive, and represents, I think, a significant aspect of Qohelet's portrayal, which enables him to act and speak cooperatively, as it were, while remaining isolated. In more than half the uses that Koosed lists, though, the heart is not Qohelet's own, and in, e.g., 11.9–10, the same virtual dichotomy is attributed by Qohelet to others. This is an aspect not just of Qohelet, therefore, but of the anthropology attributed to him.

⁴⁶ Perry, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 6, suggests that Qohelet offers 'his own curriculum vitae as an example not to follow', and whether or not that is entirely true of Qohelet himself, I think it is probably true of the book as a whole.

are disengaged from Qohelet's rhetoric, and itself emphasizes piety over pleasure, the epilogue not only picks up much of Qohelet's vocabulary (as we shall see when we turn to it in the commentary), but also offers strong continuity, therefore, both with the portrayal of Qohelet in the monologue and with an important aspect of his message. Qohelet cultivated wisdom to the point that he was forced to an unhappy realization of the limits set on life: we should not do the same.

5. Unity and Coherence

From all that has been said so far, it will be clear that I consider Ecclesiastes to be essentially the work of a single writer, not only when it comes to the relationship between the superscription, monologue and epilogue, but also with respect to the monologue itself. To be sure, Qohelet's words do not always flow smoothly, as a single, coherent discussion, but they are framed as a broadly sequential series of experiences, and of reflections arising from those experiences, which, at least until the end of ch. 8, are commonly conscripted to illustrate the specific points about vapour and profit which transcend his individual observations. It is also true, as we shall see later, that Qohelet probably draws sometimes on existing materials, and it is very likely, furthermore, that the text has become damaged at points in the course of transmission—there are even a few places in which it would not be unreasonable to suppose that it has been subject to more deliberate alteration. I see no strong grounds, however, on which to suppose either that the 'monologue' was in fact written in the first place to embody a variety of voices or opinions, or that such variety has been introduced by any extensive reworking of the monologue after it had first been composed. In this respect, my approach corresponds to that of many other recent commentators, but the book has often been read very differently in the past, and some of those older approaches continue to exercise an influence.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between several different sorts of claim. Perhaps the most basic and important is an idea found even amongst very early readers of the book, that Qohelet actively contradicts himself at various points and in respect of various issues (I have explored this at more length in 'Inner-Textuality'). This has often been used to justify other assumptions, and at one

level it is probably true: there are significant tensions between some of Qohelet's ideas—most notably his determinism and his insistence on divine judgment—which might be considered theological contradictions (although they are rarely described as such on the many occasions when they appear in other writings). The more direct contradictions that are usually singled out, however, can generally be explained either in terms of Qohelet's changing ideas, or as a consequence of failures to recognize the way in which Qohelet often qualifies his statements and ideas. An example of the first is provided easily enough by his attitude to pleasure, which is dismissed as useless in 2.2, even though Qohelet will later commend it at many different points as the only real benefit available to humans, and explicitly praise it in 8.15. It is doubtful, in fact, that he regards it as any more 'useful', in his terms, even in those later passages, but the important point, anyway, is that Qohelet's experiences after 2.2 force him to a re-evaluation of his initial opinions. Qohelet's struggles to be wise at the end of ch. 7 present a similar contrast with his claims to have been exceptionally wise in 1.16, and are surely to be explained in much the same way—but are no less problematic, of course, for scholars who read the monologue more as a static statement of opinions, than as an account of experience and development. In his recent commentary, Segal presents (110–11) a relatively long list of 'contradictions' that he thinks can be explained in these terms.

Other apparent contradictions seem specifically formulated to make a point. In 2.13–15, for instance, wisdom has an 'advantage', but Qohelet sees no genuine benefit: all wisdom does is show us an uncomfortable truth, without enabling us to change the future. In 8.10–14, rather differently, Qohelet protests the reality of divine judgment, in the face of common human experience and of apparent exceptions, explicitly to make the point that what we see is illusory. If we fail to take the point in either case, then of course there is an inconsistency—but we will not read such passages better by taking everything that Qohelet says as a statement of dogma, subject to no qualification. He is not saying 'wisdom is advantageous' or that 'God rewards and punishes' then immediately contradicting himself, but setting those statements beside observations in order to say something about either the statement or the observation. To the extent that he presents a superficial contradiction that invites

resolution, we might well say that contradictions are a significant component of Qohelet's discourse—but such cases do not imply incoherence.

Many interpreters, however, have seen contradictions in the book as symptomatic of a broader issue, and understood there to be several different viewpoints on display in the monologue, even where these do not actively contradict each other. Broadly speaking, the various expressions of this understanding involve any of three assumptions: (1) the book actually contained from the outset a dialogue, or an interplay between several different characters; (2) the book includes quotations of other viewpoints, to which Qohelet reacts; or (3) the book began with the expression of a single viewpoint, but has been supplemented with material that expresses other views.⁴⁷ Such assumptions allow a passage like 8.10–14 simply to be broken into different parts, so that, say, the more conventional sentiments of 8.12b–13 can be understood either to provoke a contrary reaction in 8.14, or to have been added as a way of softening the claim in that verse.

In the text as we have it, at least, there is no punctuation or any other way to differentiate the supposedly different views without reference solely to their content, and some early attempts to restore the book, based on more 'objective' assumptions that it was originally written in metrical verse, resulted in such savage, procrustean amputations that they have long been discredited.⁴⁸ Despite the linguistic peculiarities that we shall explore later, furthermore, no part of the book has self-evidently been composed in a different style or dialect of Hebrew which might enable us to distinguish it. Without such external criteria available, therefore, all three of these approaches present the same methodological difficulty: commentators who wish to separate the various viewpoints that they find are obliged first to define them, and then to apply their pre-determined

⁴⁷ I do not include here the various attempts (e.g. Galling; Fischer, *Skepsis*) to see the book as an anthology from the outset, because those attempts are generally driven by formal or form-critical considerations, rather than by a concern to explain different opinions. Indeed, they usually attribute most of the material to a single author.

⁴⁸ See especially Zapletal, *Das Buch Kohelet*; Haupt. Loretz, 'Poetry and Prose', has more recently taken an opposite approach, seeking to identify additions to the book in verse.

templates to the text—which is no more scientific a procedure than Michaelangelo removing the stone that was not David. Even if one of the many attempts to isolate separate voices did actually stumble upon original distinctions, we should have no way to know it or to prove it, and if the book really is composite, then we have no agreed basis for distinguishing separate voices or recovering an original version.

Martin Rose, unusual amongst recent scholars in his determination to find redactional layers throughout the book, apparently sees the current tendency to treat it as a unified work in terms of a passing modern fad, tied up with ‘final-form’ readings of texts (see his *Rien de nouveau*, 21–28), and, to be sure, the development of biblical criticism over the last few centuries has owed much to the recognition that some texts certainly are composite. It should not be our default position, however, that any text must either have been created from the wholesale redaction of sources, or have itself been subjected to extensive later editing, especially if the content as it stands can be explained without resort to such complications. In the particular case of Ecclesiastes, the approach that we take must be determined, to a great extent, by the limits of our tolerance for its formal and ideological inconsistencies. It is also important, however, to balance those considerations against the undoubted complexity of solutions which attempt to segregate the material.⁴⁹ Rose’s own work, for example, involves an assumption that the original text was very brief and preserved only in scattered parts of chs. 1–3, 8, and 12, sometimes only as short phrases within verses:

⁴⁹ Redactional theories about Ecclesiastes generally envisage something much less simple than the sort of variation between different versions of Mesopotamian ‘vanity’ texts (see below) to which Samet draws attention in her ‘Religious Redaction’. To be fair, she presents these only as potential analogies to the more straightforward addition of an epilogue to the book (although she includes no examples of an epilogue, as such), and they undoubtedly demonstrate ways in which ancient texts could undergo change and development, albeit in a very different context and over a very long period. Even in such cases, however, where we know that there has been change, it is difficult to associate such change specifically with attempts to qualify or alter the message: from many variants, Samet selects only a few instances where that may have been the case, and even those involve unprovable assumptions about the coherence and compatibility of particular themes.

this text has then been revised and supplemented, with the revised version itself then subsequently revised and supplemented again by a third hand. Brandscheidt (*Weltbegeisterung*) similarly identifies a composition that has twice been revised by others, and subjected to some additional supplementation—although she does not otherwise duplicate Rose’s results—and Kustár (‘Neue Sichten’) finds an original work that has undergone no fewer than four stages of redaction. Köhlmoos’ identification of additions, principally in the first and last chapters, by a writer ‘Z’ (for ‘Zweite Generation’, ‘second-generation’), who is variously described as an author or editor, is simpler—although she too claims that there are further additions to be found.⁵⁰ In no such studies, however, are the processes that are assumed to have given rise to the finished text depicted as entirely straightforward, and we may reasonably ask whether they provide an economic explanation for that text.⁵¹ As Jarick, ‘Festival Scrolls’, 177–79, points out, furthermore, those processes would have to have been accomplished swiftly, given the relatively short space of time between the likely date of composition and the earliest attestations of the text (on both of which, see below). If they remove inconsistencies within Qohelet’s speech, finally, they do so only by

⁵⁰ Köhlmoos’ presentation is unusual inasmuch as her ‘Z’ is not used primarily to resolve tensions or contradictions, but is depicted as sharpening the pessimism of the book, aligning it with outside traditions, and setting it more firmly against other incipient movements within Judaism. Although she claims, without specifics, that the ‘Z’ material exhibits stylistic differences, no very clear reason is offered for distinguishing this material.

⁵¹ Or a necessary one. Of Siegfried’s earlier but not dissimilar idea, that the original book was extensively supplemented by four further writers or glossators, with two epilogists and two editors subsequently inserting additional material, Barton (28) comments, ‘It is built upon the supposition that absolutely but one type of thought can be harbored by a human mind while it is composing a book’ (although he himself then goes on to identify additions by an editor and a Pharisaic glossator, 44–46). Condamin observes no less bluntly in ‘Études’, 8:503, that ‘cependant cette méthode d’exégèse, en ce qui concerne l’Ecclésiaste, est entachée d’un vice radical: l’arbitraire’, ‘so far as Ecclesiastes is concerned, this method of exegesis is besmirched by a radical vice: arbitrariness’, and goes on to note, in the course of a very thorough discussion, that Wildeboer’s commentary, also then recently published, had found no need to divide Ecclesiastes that way. More recent commentators have sometimes gone further than denying a need: Gese, ‘Komposition’, for instance, argues that sections often characterized as secondary are in fact crucial to the structure of the book.

suggesting that subsequent editors have deliberately created such inconsistencies, and raising a whole new set of questions.⁵²

Attempts to isolate different voices within the original composition, rather than in redactional layers, go back much further: Podechard ('Composition', 161–62) notes uses of this explanation even in patristic exegesis, and Bolin (*Ecclesiastes*, 69–71) discusses its role in Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, John Yeard understood the monologue in terms of a Solomonic discourse which was interrupted at points by a 'Worldling'—so 2.24, for instance, could be understood as a declaration by this sensualist, followed by Solomon's response, with the worldling taking over completely for a while in 8.14–9.18.⁵³ More than a century later, and a little differently, Joseph Sutcliffe was to declare in the introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes that:

This book is called in Hebrew קהלת CHOHELETH, convocator, or one who has collected the systems of moralists... It comprises a review of life, in which five speakers at least are introduced: the disgusted courtier—the philosopher—the stoick—the epicure—the preacher. Hence it abounds with variation of opinion, with discordant sentiments, and systems at issue with one another. For want of distinguishing those speakers, whose notions the preacher

⁵² I shall not go into the broader issues here, but the Targum (see below) provides an interesting illustration of ways in which the meaning of a canonical text could be transformed by retaining but re-contextualizing its words. Hayman, 'Qohelet', 156–59, shows a slightly different way in which another early Jewish text counters Ecclesiastes through selective quotation and re-interpretation, and goes on to explore the similar treatments in rabbinic literature. If an editor did feel, for some unknown reason, a need to retain and transmit the words of a non-canonical work with which they disagreed, it is not clear why they would instead simply have included explicit qualifications and contradictions; cf. the forceful polemic against this approach in Provan, 32–33, and on Rose's assumptions in particular, see Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 10. In that respect, Coppens, in 'La structure', makes a more plausible claim when he supposes that the book emerged in stages, but that the same author was responsible for every stage—although his identification of the different elements is, naturally, highly speculative.

⁵³ Yeard, *New Paraphrase*. The author's name has been misprinted 'Ycard' on the title-page, and is often cited accordingly (the error is even replicated in a later re-print of the work); the 'F.' has also caused confusion, but probably stands for 'Father'. Similar views were expressed in the eighteenth century by, e.g., Moses Mendelssohn, Johann Herder and Johann Eichhorn—see Weeks, *The Making of Many Books*, 81–82, 114, 116–17, 119.

attacks, as in chap. 12, men have wrested the sentiments in this book to their own destruction. They are ignorant that the preacher, towards the close especially, speaks like himself, and as a sincere believer in Moses and the prophets. “Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”

Heinemann’s commentary of 1831 (p. 3) had a little earlier expressed a similar idea, and the looser notion that Qohelet cites a variety of opinions goes back among modern scholars at least to de Groot’s commentary of 1644. It is not a view restricted to earlier such scholars, moreover, and among the important twentieth-century commentators, Levy, for instance, takes Qohelet at various points to be quoting and responding to the opinions of others (he reads 7.6b, for example, as the beginning of a response to views quoted in 7.1–6a), while Michel’s commentary sees lengthy citations with responses as a key component of the monologue.⁵⁴ Modern writers who take this approach have more generally, though, moved away from any notion that the book is a formal dialogue or deliberate collection of different opinions, toward the rather different idea that Qohelet cites and responds, in a more restricted way, to existing sayings and aphorisms, which would have been recognized as such by the original audience.⁵⁵ This understanding, most closely associated with Gordis and Whybray, can offer such recognition as a partial explanation, at least, for the otherwise puzzling lack of any formal differentiation between the different voices—although Gordis also sometimes translates Qohelet’s own words as introductions to the

⁵⁴ Helpfully, there is a list in his slightly later study: Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 245–46. Michel offers a justification for his approach in ‘Qohelet-Probleme’.

⁵⁵ Michel aside, Perry, *Dialogues*, is the principal exception: Perry reads the book as a dialogic essay in which we hear two voices, belonging respectively to the pessimistic Qohelet (‘K’), and a presenter (‘P’), who responds to him. See also Loewenclau, ‘Kohélet und Sokrates’, which compares Qohelet’s discourse to a Socratic dialogue, and more recently Greenwood, ‘Debating Wisdom’. The approach should be distinguished from that of Zimmerli, who sees the book not as a formal dialogue, but as one side of a debate, in which Qohelet engages with a more conventional wisdom represented especially in Proverbs: the conventional wise man is a *Gesprächspartner*, or ‘interlocutor’ in a less formal sense, but Qohelet’s own claims are only to be understood in the light of the claims he is attacking. See especially his Introduction (pp. 128–30), and ‘Traktat oder Sentenzensammlung?’

thoughts of others—and even some scope for identification of likely quotations using form-critical techniques.⁵⁶

I have distinguished the ‘dialogue’ and ‘quotation’ approaches above—although, truth be told, advocates of each sometimes make no clear distinction between them—principally because it is much easier to defend the possibility of isolated quotations in the text than to explain why any formal dialogue or interplay of voices seems to have been constructed so chaotically, and without any indication of the separate speakers. Being more defensible, however, does not imply that the approach is any more likely to be correct. To be sure, it is highly likely that Qohelet’s words do include existing sayings, even if the epilogue at 12.9 probably does not, as often claimed, explicitly depict him as a collector of such sayings. As Fox has pointed out, though, in his ‘Identification of Quotations’ (a thoroughly sensible article on the subject), this does not make any significant difference to what we understand Qohelet to be saying, just so long as he is citing opinions with which he agrees. The difficulties begin if, like Gordis and others, we take any of his citations to be expressions of sentiments with which he disagrees. The supposition that when Qohelet says X then Y this should sometimes be interpreted ‘(people say) X (but I say) Y’, is open to the very basic methodological questions that I have touched on with respect to all ideas about multiple voices in the monologue. As Fox puts it, moreover, ‘Recognition of quotations...may become an all-purpose tool for artificial elimination of difficulties’, and we cannot just label anything awkward as a quotation while retaining any semblance of exegetical integrity.

That is not to say, of course, that there are no expressions in the book of viewpoints with which Qohelet disagrees, and I take 1.10 and 2.26, in different ways, to include just such expressions. In those verses, though, the external claims are clearly marked and dismissed. Elsewhere, in 11.3–6 for example (and probably in the sayings that immediately precede those verses), Qohelet offers and then explicitly undermines advice that is deliberately absurd, and in

⁵⁶ Apart from their commentaries, see especially Gordis, ‘Quotations in Wisdom Literature’, and ‘Quotations as a Literary Usage’; Whybray, ‘Identification and Use’. A similar line has been pursued more recently in Spangenberg, ‘Quotations in Ecclesiastes’.

7.1–6, I think, he makes claims designed to alienate the audience, which perhaps help drive him to a re-evaluation of his own assumptions. It would be wrong, therefore, to insist that every statement in the monologue offers an opinion with which Qohelet consistently agrees, but I doubt that the presence of such passages can be used to justify the identification of multiple, unmarked quotations: where they are not clearly marked, indeed, the extraordinary character of their content makes it likely that Qohelet is at best satirizing, rather than citing, the opinions of others.

More generally, matters are complicated, of course, by the relationship between Qohelet and the author of the book: it would not be difficult to make the case that any apparent tensions or inconsistencies in the monologue result from a conscious decision to draw these out, and that the writer does not intend us to find Qohelet entirely coherent. Such might be described, perhaps, as the presence in the text not of different voices, but of different intentions. I doubt, in fact, that we are supposed to be driven into disagreement specifically with Qohelet's views on, say, determinism or the afterlife, by our reaction to the problems that he uncovers—with the exception of wisdom, about which Qohelet is ultimately critical himself, no single issue, after all, receives sufficient focus. It seems no less unlikely, on the other hand, that Qohelet is simply a mouth-piece for the author's own opinions on every matter, and a degree of inconsistency could well be an element of his characterization.

If we insist on finding incoherence then that, or some other deliberate purpose, provides a simpler explanation either than a complicated literary history or the inclusion from the outset of unmarked, contrary opinions that do not belong to Qohelet himself. In some cases, furthermore, and perhaps especially with regard to aspects of Qohelet's determinism, it may be that we find difficulties which would not have been apparent to the author or the original audience, and that we are, in effect, holding the book to too high a standard. In any case, though, it will be clear already that I consider the actual degree of contradiction and incoherence often to have been overstated. On those few occasions when we do encounter potential instances, the proper approach is to seek an explanation in each case which does not simply remove material from the reckoning.

6. Summary: the nature and purpose of the book

Ecclesiastes presents itself as the words of a very clever but rather unusual individual, Qohelet, who has devoted his life to the pursuit of a particular problem. In a world where humans each make only a brief appearance, to live lives and to act out roles assigned to them within processes beyond their comprehension, what can they actually achieve on their own behalf and for their own benefit? From the outset, Qohelet examines alongside this the quality of wisdom and the experience of pleasure. Anticipating at first that wisdom will supply his answers, he very rapidly becomes disillusioned with it, to the point that he eventually finds himself incapable of being wise any more. Having initially dismissed pleasure as pointless, however, he comes to appreciate that it is, in fact, the only genuine compensation that humans will receive from God for their efforts, which offer them benefits only if they can find satisfaction in what they are doing. The scope of Qohelet's enquiries is very wide, and he examines various spheres of human life. Human relationships with the world are characterized almost throughout, however, by the failure of humans to appreciate the limitations that are placed upon them: they try to grasp what cannot be held, and to have some impact upon what cannot be influenced.

Despite the serious tone of Qohelet's remarks the book is also an entertainment, however, with its contents carefully crafted, as we shall see later, and its themes expressed in a wide variety of different ways. Whatever we are supposed to make of Qohelet from listening to his words, moreover, an epilogue suggests that we should not, perhaps, take them entirely to heart. It would probably not be correct, therefore, to see the book specifically as some sort of polemic, even if it does offer a significant critique of any human pretensions to wisdom and self-determination, and perhaps accordingly of other literature that promoted such ideas. It may have been a desire to advertise Ecclesiastes as on a par with such literature that motivated the inclusion of hints that Qohelet was Solomon, or like Solomon, but even that is not carried through with any great conviction. Especially given the mysterious epithet 'Qohelet' itself, therefore, and the character's eventual denial of his own wisdom, it seems unlikely that his words are really being attributed to Solomon, or that Qohelet is being set up as some alternative source of authority. We may like to place works within some broader

intellectual movement or debate, and, as we shall see later, it is possible to align Qohelet's ideas with those of certain other works. The book itself offers little reason, though, to read it specifically as an attempt to overturn established ideas or to pick a fight with other authors, and its provocations are of a different order: Ecclesiastes invites us not to adopt some particular view of the world, but to react to the strong, often startling views of its protagonist. Ostriker ('Ecclesiastes', 8) talks of Qohelet inventing 'the thrill of disillusion', and claims 'a bracing exhilaration rises from his caustic treatment of everyone else's values'—which, I think, is very much the sort of response the book is after.

B. The Date and Context of Ecclesiastes

1. Date

For those interested in the history of ideas or in the development of early Judaism, the date of Ecclesiastes is potentially important, and a clear understanding of the context within which it was composed would certainly help us to assess more clearly the potential influences upon it from other sources: it is hard for us to talk about the book in relation to other texts or ideas without knowing, at least in very broad terms, when it was written. It is doubtful, on the other hand, that our understanding and interpretation of the book's message depends to any significant degree on its date: this is not a work explicitly intended to address a particular contemporary or historical situation, and it sets out, indeed, to tackle questions that are essentially universal—even if ultimately the constraints that Qohelet places upon the world involve presuppositions that not everyone would always have shared. If there are any allusions to particular people or events—which I am inclined to doubt—it is not clear that we would miss much by overlooking them. From an exegetical point of view, therefore, we can get along without requiring any absolute consensus in this area, so it may be a little surprising to find just how much has been written on this question in modern scholarship.

Two manuscripts of Ecclesiastes were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and we shall look at these in more detail below. The earlier (4QQoh^a) has been dated palaeographically to the first half of the second century BCE—more precisely to around 175–150 BCE—and